

Chapter 1 THE WORLD OF YGGDRASIA

“Yggdrasia welcomes you!”

Virtual reality (VR), as known to the public, began its first steps with a purely visual-and-aural-only system. In time, VR soon managed to replicate all sensations, and full-dive systems became the norm. The technology quickly made itself indispensable in a multitude of industries.

Some years later, the Avatar System was born: a technology that made use of Avatar bodies – crafted from electronics, special proteins and enzymes – to allow one to do dangerous work or journey the world from the comfort of their own homes through virtual reality.

And of course, it was also the heyday for VR games. Worlds of dreams and fantasy were realized upon servers, only limited by the human imagination. People waited with bated breath for the next invention, the next leap forward.

That was when a conglomerate, hailing from a certain first-world country, joined the VRMMO scene. They began recruiting beta testers for their MMORPG from all over the planet.

Created by a corporation famed for their work in the medical and defense industry and sponsored by the government, the game instantly became famous worldwide. Three millions people applied, fighting over the ten thousand slots allowed for the beta test. So grand, so fascinating was the newly-revealed world, that people wondered if this wasn't actually interdimensional travel instead.

Applicants were chosen based on their age, sex, character, employment, education, health, criminal history, and other factors. And for the lucky ten thousand, what awaited them was the world they've been salivating over: Yggdrasia. A land centered around the towering World Tree, and ninety-nine of its saplings supported the continents with a combined size equivalent to Earth.

A tuxedo-clad stuffed dog appeared. The tester needed a guide to Yggdrasia, so the AI created one. The tester showed no reaction, and the guide kept quiet in return, until it found *the right words*, selected out of the millions of possible answers it has been programmed with.

“My, my. Young lady, you're quite the adorable rabbit, aren't you?”

She said nothing.

When the Avatar System was established, the biggest problem it encountered was the *disconnect* between the human controller's perception and the avatar's.

To put it simply, the disorder was caused by the differences between the human controller's sex, physique, bone structure, height of field of view, length of limbs, or other such major characteristics and the avatar's own. Subtle differences in facial details and hair colors, however, weren't a problem. Even if their avatars did have major differences, no symptoms would show as long as the users keep their operation time short. It was constant, long-term avatar use that was the trigger, and in some cases, the user would start experiencing symptoms of mental rejections.

Once symptoms showed, as long as users rested for a few days without using VR, they would experience no lasting effects. But if they continued for several days, their psyches would begin to destabilize, with some users reporting nausea and anxiety.

The first solution to this problem was to lower the avatar's sensitivity, but the decision was reversed after the deluge of complaints coming from users who had been spoiled by the realism. The simplest solution, as decided upon by the VR industry and the medical association, was just to warn users to “use an avatar as similar to yourself as possible”.

This decision prompted the VR device makers to began incorporating full-body scanners into their product as the standard, and most VR services strongly recommended their customers to copy their appearance to use as their avatars.

Of course, the game industry was no exception. Players were allowed some leeway through changing their age setting, but in most cases, their avatars were almost carbon copies of their real bodies.

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Thus, our tester, as appeared in the AI guide's room for her initial game settings, looked the same as her scanned body in real life. If there was a real human supervising this process, they would have immediately intervene when they heard the AI call the tester "an adorable rabbit".

According to the AI's preliminary information, the girl in front of it was a Japanese emigrant, 11 years old. Suffered from a congenital

absence of pigmentation – an albino.

She was quite a bit smaller than the average for her age. She wore a simple white dress reminiscent of hospital gowns. Her arms and legs, peeking out from the dress, were barely better than twigs. On a closer look, you could see what seemed to be bruises dotting her white skin.

True, she could be considered cute, and true, her slightly scruffy white hair and scarlet eyes set into a permanent glare did make her look like a rabbit, but if an actual human with real emotions was to see her, they wouldn't call her "cute".

They'd say she looked "pitiful".

The albino stayed silent, showing no signs she heard the AI. After the required time had elapsed for the program, the stuffed dog changed its pose and began the next explanation.

"Well then, miss. Allow me to explain about the world of Yggdrasia!"

At the center of Yggdrasia was a giant, towering World Tree, and from it spawned ninety-nine Saplings to bless the lands.

They attracted the race of Humans, and around the Saplings, thirty-three major and sixty-six minor countries formed out of the myriads of villages, towns, cities, and metropolitans. Population of major countries started from a few millions to tens of millions citizens, or for minor countries, hundreds of thousands to a few millions.

The Humans' civilization looked like a mix of real-life medieval and early modern age history – if we ignored the existence of Magical Tools. Much like electrical appliances, these devices utilized Mana to serve the same purposes, and they were affordable enough even for most commoners. In larger cities, people could live, if not like a king, then at least quite comfortably.

Even carriages, trains, and ships used magical engines. Despite the world being Earth-sized, transportation and travelling were relatively simple.

Yggdrasia was filled with the power of magic, or to be more precise, Mana. Most combat centered around the use of melee weapons, magic, or rarely, single-shot magically-powered muskets.

All players were Humans, but Human was not the only race. There were also Elves, Dwarves, Beastmen, Dragonkins, and many other

races of Demihuman. They lived in settlements and colonies deep inside forests and mountains, far away from Human countries. Next, there were Goblinoids and Monster races such as Goblins, Orcs, Ogres and more, who opposed all Humankind.

To raise the stakes, the game featured a death penalty: lowered magic power, 10% decrease in stats, and dropping inventory items. In case the player had not set a respawn point, they would revive at a random location near their former death. If the player died again without raising their stats back, their character will be deleted.

Pain was simulated, but only by 10%. Players would still feel the shock of being hit even if they lowered their pain setting to the minimum.

Criminal activities would be punished following the laws of the local country, with jail time as one of the possible punishments. Players could fight each other, but if they were caught by law enforcement (in case it was murder and not a consensual duel) and received a long enough sentence, their accounts would be deleted.

Playing as a criminal was allowed, but if you got on the wanted list, your activities would be severely restricted.

Speed of time in-game was practically the same as real time. Considering the size of the world itself, each area of the game had its own time zone.

“Did you get all of that? Well then, miss, to our next business. Normally, this is where beta testers start creating their characters, but since you are one of the secret alpha testers, you will be choosing your race. As per your contract, once the

testing period ends, you will be required to maintain confidentiality and your living expenses for the next ten years will be fully covered.” The guide AI finished its speech.

The white girl nodded just a fraction.

Secret alpha testers. One hundred orphans, gathered in secret to serve as test subjects.

Publicly, this experiment’s purpose was to “gather data in order to implement PvP between human players and monster players”. Purportedly, it examined the psyche of a user when they used an entirely non-human body, as well as the mental and physical stress of

constant long-term VR use with the user's body put into cold sleep. But there were another secret reason for this experiment.

Military use.

Alpha testers were given *non-human* avatars with the sensitivity set as high as the technology could allow, and forced to stay logged-in for half a year.

“Your choices for races are as follows: ‘Goblinoids’ – examples of this type would be Goblins and Kobolds. Other than that, you can choose between ‘Beast-type’, ‘Dragon-type’, ‘Plant-type’, but I would recommend...”

“...demon...” The white girl spoke for the first time.

“Excuse me?” the AI’s speech protocol started up a new dialogue, “I see. You would pick the Demon race, then? I do not recommend using a spiritual-body type of avatar, but if that is your choice... Well then, please go to the door over there.

We will also begin installing the world’s common language pack on the way, so please stay calm.”

As the girl gave a slight nod and walked, the AI executed its final programmed action.

“Then I shall wish you a wonderful life in Yggdrasia! Oh, I almost forgot one last thing! Please tell me your name!” it called after the still-nameless girl, but she kept walking.

“...don’t need one,” she muttered.

Her final steps put her on a road of light leading into the world of the new VRMMORPG, Yggdrasia.

Chapter 2 THE FIRST BATTLE

I sighed in relief. Finally managed to get inside the game. This ‘experiment’ thing was suspicious, admittedly, but it’d still be better living conditions compared to my former orphanage.

The aura of light covering me faded. My body, formerly human, was converted into the Demon avatar I chose.

Bright, too bright! My head hurt from the 360 degrees vision I now had. I was seeing from every part of my body, instead of just my eyes. I did get the explanation, but experiencing it myself was quite intense...

The closer the simulation got to reality, the worse the feeling of *disconnect* became. Apparently, just a few years ago, the syndrome didn’t even exist. Not surprising considering that at the time, VR couldn’t simulate smells, and systems only used vibration to fake the sense of touch.

The corporation said they wanted to implement ‘PvP between human and monster players’, but if processing visual information alone was this bad, I’m pretty sure it’s not going to happen any time soon. Well, I mean, I guess that’s why they needed testers...

Which reminded me, they said secret alpha testers would have their sensitivity to pain and the senses turned to maximum, but I’d hoped they would use my physical data to tweak the finer details. The problem was whether they’d do it before their data gathering finished or not... I probably shouldn’t have much hope here.

So, half a year. Half a year like this, with zero rest... I guessed that was why the AI said this race wasn’t recommended.

Yet still, when it asked me what I wanted to be, **this** was the only choice I could think of.

My vision twisted and turned, like seeing through a kaleidoscope inside a churning whirlpool. Without the ability to even close my eyes, I decided to stay still for... somewhere around an hour. Finally, the feeling abated to a level I can bear.

Perhaps my brain finally managed to process all this visual information.

Urgh... I felt like puking. My head still spun from the dizziness and nausea, but I couldn't give up here. They wouldn't allow the secret alpha testers to give up here.

Still, the rest was worthwhile. I could finally look around. And even I, a girl who normally kept a tight lid on her emotions, was amazed by what I saw.

I'd heard that you couldn't distinguish VR games these days from real life, but this was far beyond what I expected. A light breeze, rustling leaves, shadows and dappled sunlight dancing on the ground, the wind carrying the smell of grass, of earth, and of water. All this, I felt.

This was a forest. Around me were trees, trees, and more trees. No signs of civilization anywhere. Nothing here...

No, wait. I was a 'monster' right now. I had a feeling bad things would happen if I got close to a human village. If this world was as realistic as was explained to me, human and monsters were *enemies*.

But I had more important things to worry about. The moment I understood what was around me, finally, I also understood what I was.

...a white slime? Not the bouncy, stretchy type, but a dripping, sticky slime made of thick liquid. I looked like somebody mixed up some watery dough or oobleck, then dropped the whole thing on the ground. How does this work? Could I move? I was drawing blanks on this body's mechanics of locomotion.

It took me a few moments to realize there was a small, coin-sized piece of crystal on the ground near me. What was this thing...?

As I imagined stretching my arms, a piece of slime flew out and wrapped around the crystal.

Aaaahh... right. Don't think about moving. Just do it.

At the same time, it didn't actually feel like I was moving my arms, but rather, something shot out from my shoulder. It was terribly uncomfortable.

Anyway, the crystal. What was it? This perfect sphere couldn't have naturally formed... oh, right, virtual reality. That meant it should be some kind of item...

[Identification Crystal] - 98/99

☐ This crystal ball allows one to identify one's own power and other game items.

☐ This is a bonus item for first-time players. One can buy a similar item in large cities, but they're only usable 10 times.

☐ Looking into the crystal allows one to know the general strength of the target.

※ It may be possible to learn how to identify without a crystal. Do your best!

...an identification item?

I only thought about what this thing could be, and a message appeared inside my mind. What was this number? On a whim, I used the crystal to look at a nearby tree...

[Tree] 97/99

[Magic Points: 5]

Yup, got it. The tree wasn't a game item, so I couldn't get any details on it. In contrast, the crystal was one, so there was plenty of information – at least, that was my standing theory. Magic points... was that the MP thing? Even trees had that?

According to the extremely detailed language pack and game information pack installed in my mind, "the world was filled with mana". This might be what it meant.

Wait, the number dropped... Was that "97/99" after the info box supposed to be the remaining uses of the *Identification Crystal*? It said I could buy something similar in towns, but monsters couldn't enter towns, right?

"Possible to learn how to identify without a crystal..." I really hoped I could do that before I ran out of uses. At any rate, I still had to use it one more time. On me.

[NO NAME] [Infant Demon] 96/99

☐ A nameless infant demon. A spiritual life-form. Extremely fragile.

[Magic Points: 20/20]

[Total Combat Power: 21/21]

[Unique Skill: Reroll]

...so I guess I was pretty weak? The description did say “extremely fragile”, and I only had four times the magic points of a tree. I’d admit I hadn’t ever played a game before, but judging from the information jammed inside my head, wasn’t it supposed to show more details like my strength, speed, and whatnot?

Let’s see... if I remembered correctly, this game was about defeating enemies and getting stronger, right? Who is the enemy? Will they be easy enough opponents for me? Actually, how *do* I fight? Wait, more importantly, can I move at all?

I imagined myself moving forward... It worked, but eerghh, so nauseous...

That aside, I was curious about this Unique Skill thing. Sounded kinda cool. I started wondering about the details of the skill, and immediately some text appeared.

[Unique Skill: Reroll] 95/99

☐ Uses up magic power. If activated upon a failed skill check, you will reroll the result.

☐ The more severe the failure, the more the required magic power.

☐ Bonus skill. Use of this skill is limited to secret testers.

I can use this... right? It said the skill was a bonus, but I was pretty sure they were just testing to see whether using it mentally affected the user or not anyway. Also, the skill itself wasn’t exactly surprising.

I *knew* why I have it.

I started moving. Every time I tried to go anywhere, it felt like being pushed from a cliff while blindfolded. After a while, I realized my surroundings had gotten dark.

...half a day and I probably didn't even move more than 3 meters.

The nausea constantly assaulting me was my brain's interpretation of the feeling of disconnect due to my extremely inhuman body. There was nothing wrong with my body, which was currently in cold sleep. It was all in the mind... so I could only power through it.

I wondered if the other secret alpha testers had to go through the same thing. I didn't have a chance to have a decent talk with them, and I don't think I ever would. One hundred of us, spread all over this huge world. The possibility of us meeting was infinitesimal.

A bigger problem here was encountering the ten thousand beta testers. I couldn't speak at the moment, so it was likely I would just be killed on the spot if I ever met one of them. I couldn't even run.

Dying several times in a row would get your character deleted. I'm sure the corporation wouldn't allow me to try again if that happened, and I'd lose that paid-living-expenses-for-10-years reward, too.

Maybe they'd know I'm a player if I showed them my *Identification Crystal*...? Anyway, I should find somewhere safe before it got dark heard something.

Some distance away from me was a red... thing. It looked like a caterpillar. It reared its head, like a snake trying to intimidate, and *screeched*.

Was it just an insect? Or perhaps... a monster? It looked strangely powerful, probably because of the scars I saw on its back.

Crap! The red caterpillar spat something at me. Yuck!

I tried to dodge – *tried* being the key word. The movement itself made me want to hurl. Next came the scorching heat and pain – as much as this body could recognize pain, anyway.

But the pain wasn't the worst thing. No, it was the disturbing sense of my body *eroding* bit by bit. The feeling scared me so much I accidentally used the *Identification Crystal*.

[NO NAME] 94/99

[Magic Points: 18/20]

[Total Combat Power: 20/21]

My magic power went down! My combat power, too!

Did spiritual life-forms have magic itself as their bodies?! And my combat power was tied to my magic?

I tried to run even as my mind was floundering in confusion, and the caterpillar gave chase. Holy hell were we slow, both of us! I oozed, it crawled. Yet it was still faster than me, even if only slightly.

Let's see how strong it was...

[Red Caterpillar] 93/99

[Magic Points: 22/25] **[Hit Points: 30/30]**

[Total Combat Power: 27]

Shit, it was stronger than me! Just as the item description said, identification really did only show the general strength.

It screamed. Again, the acid-ish projectile splashed on me. Hot, hot, hot!

[NO NAME] 92/99

[Magic Points: 16/20]

[Total Combat Power: 19/21]

[Red Caterpillar] 91/99

[Magic Points: 18/25] **[Hit Points: 30/30]**

[Total Combat Power: 27]

My power dropped again, yet the caterpillar's didn't! This must be the difference between spiritual lifeforms and normal monsters. Also, I used the crystal way too often! It had limited uses, damn it!

Shit, it caught up! It's biting me! Ouch, ouch! It felt like my own existence was being *gouged out*!

Right, my unique skill!

[Reroll]

The caterpillar tried to bite me again, but the moment its fangs were

about to pierce me, they hit only air. Huh...? I got out of that attack, but was that it?

[NO NAME] 90/99

[Magic Points: 6/20]

[Total Combat Power: 12/21]

Fuck, fuck, fuck! I lost a ton of magic! This skill was way too expensive!

Oh god it's eating me ow ow ow...

I died.

Once I ran out of magic points, my spiritual body disappeared. I was reborn later, somewhere in a forest.

My first battle was a defeat. But...

[NO NAME] 89/99

[Magic Points: 1/10] 10↓

[Total Combat Power: 5/11] 10↓

...wasn't the death penalty only supposed to be a 10% reduction in stats?

Chapter 3 MY RIVALS WERE SQUIRRELS AND SNAKES

I sighed. My first VRMMO battle ended in disaster.

Currently, I was hiding inside a hollow tree trunk somewhere in the pitch-black forest, waiting for my magic to recover.

[NO NAME] [Infant Demon] 83/99

□ A nameless infant demon. A spiritual life-form. Extremely fragile.

[Magic Points: 7/10]

[Total Combat Power: 9/11]

[Unique Skill: Reroll]

I'd heard that when players die, they lose 10% of their stats, but then why did I lose a whole half of mine? Was it just how it work for monsters? Or was it just for spiritual life-forms like me? Damn it, I had no idea.

Could it be? Could it possibly be that spiritual life-forms were incredibly weak?

At least my magic recovered over time. I had just a single magic point when I respawned. At the time, I seriously thought there was no way to progress any further.

My body shrank due to losing half my magic, which allowed me to hide within a hollow tree. What should I do now...? If I immediately died again, my character would probably be deleted, right?

The AI said my inventory would be dropped at my point of death, but this *Identification Crystal* still stayed with me. I wasn't sure why. Perhaps it was because the crystal was a basic item for new players, or perhaps because I kept it inside my body. Anyway, thank god for that.

There had been a few discoveries while I was holing up in this tree.

My magic recovered by 1 approximately each hour. I didn't know if this was a flat increase of 1, or if it was a 10%

recovery, since my current maximum magic was exactly 10. The things I could do would be different, depending on which it was.

After using [**Identification**] on a few wild animals passing by my tree, I found out something. If I lost all my magic power, it's over for me, but when normal animals' magic points dropped to zero, they just fainted. They only died when their hit points dropped to zero.

...is this normal?

Next, when normal animals lost some magic points, their combat power still stayed the same. However, their magic points would drop bit by bit when in combat. I didn't know whether it was because they used magic to attack, because combat itself took magic power, or because they strengthened themselves magically.

I saw a snake attacking a squirrel. When the squirrel died, the snake sucked up some kind of mist from its corpse.

I could see pretty well despite the darkness. Was it just how the game was, or was it because I was a monster?

And finally, there was a drone beetle. It approached me, thinking I was some kind of tree sap and I killed it, but I didn't get any stronger.

At any rate, I needed to find a way to fight. Judging from appearances, the only things weaker than that caterpillar that I could find were the 'snakes', the 'field mice', and the 'squirrels'.

Which meant that the caterpillar was the weakest *monster* in this forest. And right now, I was much weaker than it.

Just using my unique skill, **[Reroll]**, to make the caterpillar miss already ate up around 10 of my magic power, so it wasn't practical at the moment.

But there was one good thing that came from that mess. All that desperate running around helped me get used to this body, and the nausea was much more tolerable now.

Not much of a silver lining, really.

Anyway, my next goal was to get strong enough to kill a squirrel.

There should be a way to leverage my doughiness, I thought. Which resulted in my current attempt to ambush a squirrel from above a tree. I dropped and covered it with my whole body.

At first, the squirrel violently resisted. It suffocated and stopped moving after a while, and I absorbed some kind of mist from it. Hmm, I didn't feel anything different...

[NO NAME] [Infant Demon] 82/99

□ A nameless infant demon. A spiritual life-form. Extremely fragile.

[Magic Points: 10/10]

[Total Combat Power: 11/11]

[Unique Skill: Reroll]

Yup, nothing changed. And the corpse was still here. What do I do with it?

Do I eat it? How? I wasn't going to melt it down like normal slimes. Even my own doughy body looked far tastier.

Well, I couldn't do anything about it, so I just left it there... was this really fine, though? I only had my theoretical knowledge. It wasn't like I'd ever played a game before.

Since then, I killed another two mice with the same method. Finally, something changed.

[NO NAME] 79/99

[Magic Points: 10/11] 1↑

[Total Combat Power: 11/12] 1↑

Both my magic power and combat power rose by 1. It was just a single point, but it *did* increase. It made me happy, true, but mostly I just felt relieved.

Ah, another snake showed up, attracted by the corpse. It looked like my body had some pretty sharp senses. I managed to learn how to detect 'presences' now, somehow.

I swiftly and carefully snuck my way up the tree, back to my old ambush spot. The snake still hadn't noticed me.

My handling of my body had gotten much better. I was probably as fast as that caterpillar now. Not exactly an impressive achievement, I know.

The feeling of being an indistinct mass still made me nauseous, but little by little, it had gotten better. Tolerable, now.

I hid myself on the tree and looked down. The 1-meter long snake slithered toward the mouse I killed – oh, wait, another snake showed up.

The two began to intimidate each other over the meal.

[Snake] 78/99

[Magic Points: 5/5] [Hit Points: 15/15]

[Total Combat Power: 15]

Huh, snakes were weak. Still stronger than me and squirrels, though. Also, *Identification Crystal*, you didn't even put any thought into naming them, did you?

They hissed.

...can you two please do this somewhere else? You're messing up my plans here. I *could* just not peep and go elsewhere, but I was afraid I'd accidentally run across another snake or caterpillar in the process.

Both of them were about the same strength. Perhaps that was why none of them were willing to back off and miss out on a fresh meal. They began fighting.

Both of them twisted, turned, and generally just tried to constrict the other. The fight looked... really boring. After some time, one of them finally landed a bite on the other's neck.

Yup, boring. It kept biting for a while, then won the fight just like that. Again, the winner absorbed the mist-like thing from the loser.

[Snake] 77/99

[Magic Points: 3/6] 1↑ [Hit Points: 8/16] 1↑

[Total Combat Power: 16] 1↑

Oh? Its stats went up a bit. Was this a 'level up' kind of thing, as I suspected?

The winning snake was hesitating between the mouse and its newly-killed meal... whoops, it saw me.

Fine, then. Preemptive self-defense! I jumped down from the branch and wrapped myself all around the snake. It shrieked something fierce.

Ooohh crap, it's big. At the moment I only had enough volume to fill a bowl, so I couldn't completely cover the snake.

It retaliated by constricting me, but failed due to my sloppy, doughy

body.

And then I felt the snake suddenly heat up. Without warning, it chomped at me in a burst of newly-discovered strength.

That hurt quite a bit!

[Snake] 76/99

[Magic Points: 2/6] [Hit Points: 8/16]

[Total Combat Power: 16]

The snake's magic power dropped. So it's true, then, that you needed magic to strengthen yourself.

[NO NAME] 75/99

[Magic Points: 8/11]

[Total Combat Power: 10/12]

Hey, I *just* got my magic back up again! You damn reptile!

In my anger, I started to flail about. From my doughy body came whips to bash, to kick, to punch, and generally just throwing a tantrum right on the snake. I didn't even know what I was doing.

The snake's body cooled down, perhaps running out of magic. Then a few of my tentacles hit its head, but they were deflected.

...eh? Really?

The snake gave a few twitches, which stopped after I covered its head and squeezed. My body sucked in the mist from the corpse.

...I won.

[NO NAME] [Infant Demon] 74/99

☐ A nameless infant demon. A spiritual life-form. Extremely fragile.

[Magic Points: 8/13] 2↑

[Total Combat Power: 10/14] 2↑

[Unique Skill: Reroll]

So, I got stronger when I won and absorbed the mist. Was that mist the snake's magic? Vitality? I guess I'll just call it

'life force'.

My guess – huh, it'd been a lot of guessing and hypothesizing, hadn't it? – was that for monsters and animals that had physical bodies, their *Total Combat Power* enumerated the power they had only when they strengthened themselves with magic, while spiritual life-forms like me always fought with 100% of my *Total Combat Power*.

I had always thought spiritual life-forms to be weak, but if this hypothesis proved true, I needn't be. Hopefully.

Also, please let me learn [Identification] already.

Chapter 4 REVENGE

I continued killing squirrels and snakes for quite some time... just two days, actually. Anyway, here was the results.

[NO NAME] [Infant Demon] 62/99

□A nameless infant demon. A spiritual life-form. Extremely fragile.

[Magic Points: 26/26] 13↑

[Total Combat Power: 30/30] 16↑

[Unique Skill: Reroll]

Now I could take vengeance upon the dreaded caterpillar! Probably!

Well, I needed to get strong enough to win against the caterpillars anyway. I wouldn't be able to leave the forest otherwise.

I could use **[Reroll]** twice now, but its usefulness was still very much in doubt. The ability to retry after a failure sounded amazing at first, but the only success I'd had with this skill was the time I forced the caterpillar to miss its biting attack.

Furthermore, when rerolling, there was still the possibility that I'd fail again. Also, the skill used the specific words

“required magic power”, which probably meant that the more powerful the attack I used it on, the more magic it's going to take. 10 magic points was just for dodging the caterpillar's bite.

And finally, I was a spiritual life-form. My combat ability would drop like a rock if my magic went low.

...so I supposed my unique skill would have to stay unused for the time being. Perhaps it could be a trump card.

There were a few new discoveries.

Total Combat Power of monsters and creatures which had hit points didn't drop when they lost magic power, but did when they lost a

large amount of hit points. Such creatures normally didn't look very powerful. Only when they entered combat and spent magic would they exert power equivalent to their *Total Combat Power*.

In contrast, spiritual life-forms like me didn't have hit points, because our magic *was* our life force itself. Both my magic and *Total Combat Power* would drop upon receiving damage. In return, magic points regenerated faster over time than hit points, and I could always attack with the full power of my *Total Combat Power* without spending magic.

Spiritual life-forms weren't actually that weak. Still, I couldn't help but felt it unfair.

Also, there were still no signs I'd come any closer to learning **[Identification]**.

That was my situation. For the time being, I planned on continuing to gain as much strength as I could.

Currently, for a flawless victory against the snakes, I would need to attack from ambush. I'd like to get strong enough to win without a scratch in a head-on fight, at least.

I moved through the forest, slowly enough to not get dizzy, while wondering if there was any convenient prey nearby.

Then, I spotted a presence some distance away. I focused my 360-degrees-fullscreen vision upon that direction.

Ah, that's a red caterpillar. The woods gave way to a small clearing of sunlight and flowers. There the caterpillar lay, chewing on a few petals.

[Red Caterpillar] 61/99

[Magic Points: 28/28] 3↑ **[Hit Points: 37/37]** 7↑

[Total Combat Power: 35] 8↑

Huh, surprisingly powerful. Wait, it had a scar on its back. Could it be the same red caterpillar that killed me the first time? It had a darker shade now, though.

I see... it killed me to level up, didn't it?

What should I do? It was stronger than me, so I didn't really want to fight it. Since my death, I had already regained my strength and then some. Another death penalty would hurt a ton.

Yet at the same time, I wasn't sure if I would ever have the chance to meet the same caterpillar again, in the same forest. I still remembered *very* clearly the pain of having my body shaved away, bit by bit.

If possible, I wanted my revenge.

Both of us had gotten stronger since then, but I also learned how to move my body and how to fight. A straight fight wouldn't be easy. I might be able to win with an ambush, if I do it right.

My chances weren't zero. Its combat power was only 20% higher. A strong first hit from ambush should give me the advantage.

And finally, I was the faster one now. I could just run away if the fight turned out bad.

I made my decision and climbed up a nearby tree. From branch to branch I moved, approaching my target. The red caterpillar was right in the center of a flower bed, which had no trees growing, but the clearing was only 5 meters large. I should be able to reach it by jumping from a protruding branch.

Wiggling, oozing, following the branches. I'd gotten used to the way this body moves, but that nauseous feeling of disconnect was still there.

I took aim... and... now!

I flew from the branch. As I dropped down right on top of the red caterpillar, I stretched out a whip of dough and slammed on its back.

It shrieked and jumped in pain. Got you!

[Red Caterpillar] 60/99

[Magic Points: 28/28] **[Hit Points: 27/37]**

[Total Combat Power: 33] 2↓

Good, that's thirty percent gone. Not only that, it looked like I hit it right in its old wound and ripped it open, which staggered it and

somewhat reduced its combat power. At this point, we were equal in power. With my superior speed, I held the advantage, if only slightly.

I landed, splattering myself on the flower bed. It looked at me and finally realized it was under attack. The red caterpillar roared in rage, its body turning a darker shade.

Wait, that's not the normal screech it usually did...

And then I heard the answering shrieks. Around the flower bed arrived three more red caterpillars. Really? Really?

[Red Caterpillar x 3] 57/99

[Magic Points: 20/20] [Hit Points: 25/25]

[Total Combat Power: 22]

Were they minions? Subordinates? A harem? I once heard that in insects, the females are generally bigger, so was this a reverse harem? Damn bitch, you've let power gone to your head!

They were smaller and weaker than the first red – well, dark-red now – caterpillar I encountered, but still much stronger than the snakes.

The plan had failed. Time to run.

Four caterpillars in four directions, all coming for me. I jumped towards the one opposite the dark-red.

It screamed, raising its head like a snake and spat acid. I dodged, flying like a butterfly... if butterflies didn't have wings and were made of soggy clay, anyway.

My tentacle smashed into its head. Oh, it hurt a bit. Did I hit its fang? Was there still acid left? Anyway, I should try to avoid attacking the face from now on.

It started to squirm and writhe, seemingly in a great amount of pain from my counterattack. Hey, squirm somewhere else, would you? You're blocking my escape path.

Meanwhile, the other three had caught up.

A screech accompanied another projectile. Wait, fire? Fire, not acid?! That dark-red caterpillar just spat *fire* at me!

Impressive range, too. The fire mercilessly burned both me and the red caterpillar. Such cruelty.

[NO NAME] 56/99

[Magic Points: 22/26]

[Total Combat Power: 26/30]

Oh man, that was a lot of points gone. I couldn't let this hit me again. The well-cooked red caterpillar restarted its spasms.

Smelled delicious.

Meanwhile, another red caterpillar had caught up to me. Seemed like the smaller red caterpillars were faster than the dark-red one.

It chomped at me. I only barely managed to turn it into a glancing blow and counterattacked.

[NO NAME] 55/99

[Magic Points: 20/26]

[Total Combat Power: 24/30]

I was going to get bogged down, at this rate. The last red caterpillar hadn't come any closer, seemingly the careful type, while the dark-red spat fire once again. The bug I was fighting attempted another bite, caring not one whit for the approaching mass of flame. I moved, putting it between me and the projectile, and then fire covered the both of us.

[Reroll]

All the fire around me suddenly *moved* to light up the red caterpillar, while I was unharmed. Thank god it worked!

[NO NAME] 55/99

[Magic Points: 10/26]

[Total Combat Power: 15/30]

And there was the expected crash in magic points and combat power. The damage might have been lower if I just let the projectile hit me, true, but that was part of the plan.

The caterpillar was near-death, now. All-out attack!

These bugs did seem to be quite soft, comparatively. After hitting the doubly-cooked red caterpillar a few times, the mist was released.

[NO NAME] 54/99

[Magic Points: 16/33] 7↑

[Total Combat Power: 21/38] 8↑

That was a good boost of power. Plus, my spent magic was replenished, if only a little bit.

Seeing its fallen comrade, the dark-red caterpillar howled.

Now even the careful caterpillar was joining the fight, seemingly scared of the wife's anger. It circled around and spat acid at me. That was pretty smart, for a caterpillar. For a moment, I wondered if it was one of the other secret alpha testers, but despite the intelligence, it wasn't human-smart.

I moved between the two bugs and squished myself down. Both of them spat out their respective projectiles at the same time, which only whiffed right above me and went on to hit each other.

The dark-red lost itself in its howling rage and changed target to the acid-spitter. I took the chance to finish off the very first burn victim of the dark-red.

[NO NAME] 53/99

[Magic Points: 22/40] 7↑

[Total Combat Power: 28/45] 7↑

I finally came close to the strength I first had at the beginning of this battle.

The dark-red screeched, attracting my attention. It just bit the acid-spitter to death. Aww... what a waste.

[Dark-Red Caterpillar] 52/99

[Magic Points: 10/33] 5↑ [Hit Points: 24/42] 5↑

[Total Combat Power: 38] 5↑

And that one got quite a bit stronger too, but as I expected, it didn't regain any lost life. Low magic power, too. That fire projectile attack must have been expensive.

...also, it turned out that the identified names weren't the actual, official names. They changed according to my perception.

It still had higher combat power than me, but I'd come this far. I wouldn't run.

I provoked it with a hop and once again it spat fire, still ruled by anger.

Now, there were no longer any obstacle to take the hit for me, so **[Reroll]** would surely be a lot more expensive than last time. And it was probably going to fail again anyway.

So I didn't even try to dodge. It burned. It hurt so much I would have cried if I still had my tear ducts, but I rushed forward anyway and started a melee fight head-on.

Three minutes since the brawl began, the dark-red caterpillar suddenly weakened, its hits no longer hurting me as much.

Just as I expected.

[Dark-Red Caterpillar] 51/99

[Magic Points: 1/33] [Hit Points: 16/42]

[Total Combat Power: 38]

Zero magic points would leave it unconscious. So if it couldn't use any magic, it wouldn't be able to access its full strength. Just a big caterpillar, nothing more.

The scuffle went on for some time, and finally the dark-red went down. My victory was rewarded with the familiar mist.

[NO NAME] [Infant Demon] 48/99

□A nameless infant demon. A spiritual life-form. Extremely fragile.

[Magic Points: 17/55] 15↑

[Total Combat Power: 25/60] 15↑

[Unique Skill: Reroll]

[Evolution Available]

Nice, nice, I got a lot more powerful. Caterpillars no longer posed a threat... hmmm?

...evolution?

Chapter 5 THE CHOICE

“Secret alpha tester No. 78. Time elapsed: 71 hours. Delirium, leading to mental collapse. As per procedure, subject will be forced to log out and moved to the collection room.”

Here, at the 7th research center of a certain conglomerate, 100 so-called “secret alpha tester” human subjects were undergoing an experiment within the MMORPG, “World of Yggdrasia”. Over 50 staff members were monitoring them 24/7, with ten persons each shift.

After the staff member’s announcement, the collecting process began in another facility. Subject No. 78 was thawed and released from the VR capsule. The medical staff carried the kid away in indifference.

Brian, the deputy director of this particular research center, watched the process through a monitor. He sighed and clicked a few buttons.

“So how many does this make?”

“Including No. 78, we have had 8 people logging out due to mental collapse. Another 2 died from their minds weakening.” His secretary, a gorgeous woman nearing her thirties, answered stoically.

The mental strain of using a different VR avatar from one’s real body first became a problem several years ago, and it had only gotten worse with the advance in VR technology. Increasing realism went hand-in-hand with an increasing number of reported mental instability.

As present, there were only three solutions.

First, was to simply lower the sensitivity of the VR system. This was not practical due to how indispensable VR had made itself in so many aspects of society, not to speak of the users’ ever-increasing demand for realism.

Second, to get used to the experience with the help of drugs and medical supervision. However, the user still needed to train for a long period of time, and success was not guaranteed. This solution also caused several other problems such as possible drug addiction and difficulty in returning to society, and thus was also impractical to implement.

Third, to minimize the differences between the user and their avatar. This was the simplest, problem-free solution, and so became the standard choice.

The 7th center's focus was on exploring the effect of non-human avatar use on the human mind. For this purpose, the center had acquired orphans within the age of 10 to 15 for their still-flexible minds, and the fact that they had no relatives.

These kids had had their records 'legally' deleted from the system. Upon the conclusion of this experiment, they would have their livelihood guaranteed for ten years and new identities made.

Monster avatars, with their unnatural powers and movement, took quite some time to make, which delayed the project. In the end, the secret alpha testers began their experiment at the same time the official beta testers joined the game.

Depending on the results, this experiment could be a large step forward for the medical field.

"So, ten percent dropped out after just 70 hours."

"Sir, I believe the cause might be the lack of sleep. At maximum, VR sensitivity even surpassed real life, which put so much stress on their minds that they couldn't rest. Should we lower it?"

"That'd be putting the cart before the horse. If sensitivity is low, we might as well be using remote-controlled drones or AI tanks. As *weapons*, they'd be useless . "

Brian snorted. He looked at the large monitor showing the mental states of the 100 test subjects, updated in real-time.

Dead – 2 subjects.

Logged out due to mental collapse – 8 subjects.

Delirious – 12 subjects.

Gone berserk due to loss of rationality – 11 subjects.

Mentally unstable – 37 subjects.

“Sir, I’ve just received a report. A berserk alpha tester had made contact with a few beta testers, then defeated after a fight broke out.”

“Which one?”

“Excuse me. It was the alpha tester who started as a goblin and advanced into a hobgoblin. The beta testers who defeated them was a party of four, but they also suffered one casualty.”

“I see. As foreseen, the closer to human the avatar, the faster their evolution. So how many subjects have reached evolution?”

“Twenty-seven. Among them, one had died and four more have had a mental collapse, so currently twenty-two are still logged-in. However, over half of them are extremely unstable. Some of them are delirious, or have gone berserk.”

“Yes, increased stress due to a sudden change of form. Worst case scenario, we may need to look into injecting a few of them...”

“Six subjects have achieved evolution with only light mental instability. Furthermore, subject No. 13 have unlocked evolution while relatively stable.”

“No. 13, huh...” Brian muttered.

Answering him, the screen showed the sight of a snow-white girl, her red pupils shooting daggers at the camera. Brian remembered her. Understanding dawned on his face, and he nodded.

“Ahh, right. The ‘Demon Child’...”

* * *

[NO NAME] [Infant Demon] 47/99

□ A nameless infant demon. A spiritual life-form. Extremely fragile.

[Magic Points: 17/55] 15↑

[Total Combat Power: 25/60] 15↑

[Unique Skill: Reroll]

[Evolution Available]

...evolution available? Right, the explanation did include this.

Once a monster player raised their levels enough, they can evolve into another type of monster within the same evolution tree.

Anyway, I needed more details. I focused my thoughts on the *Evolution Available* part, and more text appeared.

Available Evolutions from [Infant Demon] 46/99

Displaying current choices.

[Imp]

[Shadow]

[Gremlin]

[Ghast]

There were quite a few choices... I'd have to check them out one by one. My *Crystal* only had half its uses left, yet I still hadn't learned the skill. Worrying was just futile, I know, but I couldn't help myself.

[Imp] 45/99

☐ A tiny, hideous demon. Lives in people's houses, and loves to play pranks.

That explanation was much too short! It didn't even say anything about the next evolutions. So useless.

...whatever. Might as well finish off the rest.

[Shadow] 44/99

☐ A demon of shadows. Takes over the place of a living being's shadow. Disturbs the mind of the possessed.

[Gremlin] 43/99

☐ A type of evil fairy. Possesses inventions of man, and interferes with

operation.

[Ghast] 42/99

☐A gaseous demon. Formed from a collection of black dust and soot. Can transform into many different shapes.

Hmmm... I guess if I wanted a typical demon, I should go the Imp path? But it's ugly... I didn't know how powerful they could get, but the size didn't assure me.

I was slightly partial to the Shadow. If they could possess human shadows, then they might be able to enter human villages. Ah, but what if I turned white again after my evolution?

Gremlins also seemed to be a straightforward choice, but what exactly are 'inventions'? Could I possess an airship and drop it? This had the potential for mass murder, but would I have to attack humans?

Ghasts were the most mysterious one. What do I do with the ability to change shapes?

All of them had their pros and cons. None of them seemed to be useful in a straight fight. What should I do?

Anyway, it looked like I couldn't evolve if my magic wasn't full so for the time being, it was time to rest. I decided to laze about in the clearing to calm myself down – all this time, this sense of *disconnect* had been putting my mind off-balance. Maybe I could watch the flowers.

You could say I was just escaping from reality, but, well, I'm a *very* experienced escapist. Really, I wish those corporation people would just lower the sensitivity already...

My mind wandered, until it landed on the caterpillar corpses. They were *seriously* cramping my style, here. Could I use them for something?

They *did* have those fangs that no bugs should ever have. Maybe I could rip them out and sell them in a town, somewhere? A monster selling monster materials. I'd be turning a lot of heads. Well, I had some free time, might as well try.

I approached the dark-red. Up close, the huge corpse looked a lot

more grotesque than I thought.

I wasn't really in the mood to carefully dismantle it, so I just stretched out a gooey tentacle to start pounding. It wasn't so much dismantling as *pulverizing*. Which still worked – I got one out of the pair of fangs. It looked quite sturdy. Also, the other fang broke.

I didn't want to look at this aftermath of a splatter movie, but I couldn't close my eyes. Which might have been for the better, since otherwise I wouldn't have noticed the twinkling object inside the corpse.

What was this thing? A gem? It was the size of a bean and colored black, which made it look more like a really nice piece of coal rather than a gem. I tried poking it, and suddenly it disappeared inside my body. Eh? What happened? Where did it go?

I searched everywhere in my body but found nothing. Instead, I noticed my depleted magic power recovering at a far faster rate.

What was that? A magic-emitting rock? Well, if it could recover my magic, then all the more convenient. I looked for stones inside the other three red caterpillar corpses too, but smashing them open revealed nothing.

Questions after questions. Did these stones only form inside strong monsters? Perhaps that was the 'magic stone' I was told about. Well, no matter. Thanks to the stone, I only took an hour to recover all my magic power.

Hey, dark-red. I'm not going to say I was grateful for the fight, but... it wasn't meaningless.

[NO NAME] [Infant Demon] 41/99

□ A nameless infant demon. A spiritual life-form. Extremely fragile.

[Magic Points: 55/55]

[Total Combat Power: 60/60]

[Unique Skill: Reroll]

[Evolution Available]

Indeed. It wasn't meaningless at all. Thus, I made my decision.

Likely as not, there'd be more difficulties ahead of me no matter which path I choose. My worn-out soul might just be in tatters by the end, yet still, I didn't want everything I had done to be meaningless.

And so, I gave form to my desire in my mind and made a wish with all my heart.

Chapter 6 THE FIRST EVOLUTION

I decided on the Ghast.

The immaterial, malleable demon of dust and gases. It wouldn't be much different from the body of wet dough I'd been using. Imps and Gremlins, with their hands and legs, would have been much better for my mind. I was sure of that.

But no. I didn't want all my experience to count for nothing.

...well. I just wanted to say something cool there. My life was going to be shitty no matter the choice anyway, so I didn't put all that much thought to it.

Following my wish, my snow-white slime body began to break do-hey, no, wait, shit. This is bad.

I could *feel* myself being arranged into something different, and apparently my brain didn't like that very much. My vision whited out, I felt myself thrown into a raging whirlpool, twisting and turning in incomprehensible directions. Nausea and dizziness began to lay siege, without mercy. Head-splitting pain. An infinite number of ants swarming-

-no, no. This wasn't real! I didn't have a physical body at the moment. This was nothing more than a delusion cooked up by my mind! I *knew* that, but **fucking idiot brain!**

Come on, stay a... wake...

...

.....

.....

Oh boy.

It took a whole day for my evolution to finish.

I seriously thought my non-existent head was going to explode.

Well, to be more precise, the *Evolution* itself probably only took a few

minutes, but after it was done I couldn't move for all of a day.

I only just managed to start thinking human thoughts again an hour ago. Until then, my world was made of headaches, flashing colors in my eyes, and so much nausea that I couldn't move a millimeter.

I still couldn't, even now. My new body's senses were all out of whack.

[NO NAME] [Race: Ghast] [Low Demon (Low-Rank)] 33/99

☐ A low demon made of dust and gases. A fragile spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 90/90] 35↑

[Total Combat Power: 100/100] 40↑

[Unique Skill: Reroll]

Ghast. A low demon of dust and gases. See this “dust and gases” part? That was the problem. My senses extended to every single particles that made up my body.

What this meant was that every time the wind blew, armies of ants would start having a party on the parts of my body moved by the breeze.

Such a pain...

I'd been trying my best to ignore the whole thing, but on second thought, that might not have been the best idea. If I tried to get used to this body by *ignoring* the problem, that would mean discarding the advantage of using a monster avatar in the first place. Instead, I should turn the problem into a solution: make my hypersensitivity work for me rather than against me.

That was the strength of monsters, and also what separated them from humans.

...at the same time, I had the strangest feeling, as if I was slowly losing bits and pieces of my own *human vulnerabilities* from all the abuse my mind had suffered since I started using this monster avatar...

Was weakness not what make humans so beautiful, in the end?

Alright, that was enough monologuing. I got so much more powerful now; I should try to get moving as soon as possible.

That reminded me, my status showed [**Low Demon (Low-Rank)**]. That's *two* 'low' in a row. How weak was the pre-evolution ball of dough, then?

I was lucky that no caterpillars or snakes came by when I was still immobile. There was a squirrel, but it ran the moment it found out I was here.

My first priority would be to learn how to use my senses. For the first time, I *opened my eyes* and truly *looked* at what was happening with my body. Immediately, a torrent of information slammed into me.

...head hurt. Too much useless information. I didn't need to know how many blades of grass or grains of sand I was touching, or how much dust was blowing in the wind. Huh, I just realized how reliant on sight and hearing humans were, despite having five senses.

Anyway. I should try to selectively process only the relevant information. Hopefully my subconscious could handle the task for me if I practice enough. If not, well, I'd probably go insane, so I couldn't slack off here.

Which meant I'd need to train my brain to get used to this amount of information as its new default state. Oh boy... I wasn't looking forward to returning to reality after this. It's going to be a hell of a time getting used to the lack of information again.

Let's do this bit by bit, then. This sort of training was never meant to be completed in a day or two. Meanwhile, I should try to move.

I supposed this body should handle the same way as the doughy one. It was the reason why I picked the Ghast, after all. I was going to facepalm so hard otherwise.

...oh? Oooh! I just *floated*!

I see, I see, so Ghasts could float. Well, not surprising, actually. They were made of gases. On one hand, this afforded me so many new possibilities. On the other, stomach-churning nausea, *again*... Blergh.

My vision hadn't stopped turning since a while now, most likely due to my body constantly being moved by the air currents, and it'd

continue to do so as long as I wasn't being aware. So I focused my consciousness and forced my body to stay still. Finally, I could see myself.

I looked like... a 1-meter sphere of incredibly thick smoke? Not exactly outside my expectations, but why was I *white* again? The game reproduced my albinism in the weirdest ways. Please stop it already.

Ah, right. You know what happens when you pour water on dry ice? That.

I drifted forward. Hey, this worked. Felt like I was bungee jumping every time I moved, which was scary, but I could move the same way I did when I was still a slime.

I couldn't rise too much, though – there was some kind of force pulling me down, and its strength was proportional to my distance from the ground. It was difficult to get any higher than the height of the windows of a two-story building.

So that was my vertical limits. Horizontally, I could move as fast as a person walking, or race-walking if I pushed myself.

Faster than dough-me, obviously. You'd think I would go 'Weeeee! I can fly!', but no, my perception was much too sensitive for that. Bugs were crawling on my skin every time the winds touched me. Nothing was fun about this.

...really, could I ever get used to this?

For the time being, I elected to process enough information for my senses to be slightly better than a normal person's.

Particularly my sense of smell and presence detection – for those, I tried to be as aware of the unconscious goings-on as possible.

Oh, found a red caterpillar. It looked small, so probably a male. I silently drove my body of gas closer and prepared to attack... I *could* just attack the same way I'd been doing, right?

I thrust a part of me forward. There was no impact. The tentacle of air simply covered the caterpillar and sucked it dry in a few seconds.

...holy crap.

I couldn't believe this was the same caterpillar I used to have so much trouble with. I just won in a flash. Gruesomely, too.

[NO NAME] [Race: Ghast] [Low Demon (Low-Rank)] 30/99

☐ A low demon made of dust and gases. A fragile spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 91/91] 1↑

[Total Combat Power: 101/101] 1↑

[Unique Skill: Reroll]

Apparently I also drained its lifeforce with that attack. Well, that was good and all, but it didn't give me much. Could be because of my evolution. Setting the dark-reds aside for a moment, but the red ones used to give me around 7 points.

That's it, then. I might be outgrowing this area. It'd been my plan to leave the forest once I got stronger, anyway.

...still, if I saw any, I'd hunt. Points were important, even if just one.

Another 10 more reds hunted after a day of journey. I'd gotten a lot more used to moving myself. Filtering information was still difficult.

This forest was *huge*. I'd never seen anything other than trees the whole time. I'm not actually going deeper, am I? That wasn't to say coming across a human village wouldn't be a problem, however.

Oh, I detected something. A stronger presence than most.

What was it? Where was it? I stayed on guard for a while, but saw nothing, so I decided to hover forward. There it was, behind a large tree.

Maybe I just imagined it, but I thought our eyes met. As much as I could have eyes.

It was a black caterpillar, around 60 centimeters, and twice as large as a red one.

Whoa! It just screeched and spat out fire without warning. From all

the way over there, too!

[Black Caterpillar] 29/99

[Magic Points: 39/45] [Hit Points: 60/60]

[Total Combat Power: 75]

Quite a bit more powerful than reddie. Was this the next evolution step of the dark-red? Why caterpillars? Get to butterflies already.

Wait, what are you doing spitting fire in a forest?! Damn it, I couldn't afford to stay defensive fighting a high-power monster. All-out offense!

I circled around the big tree to strike from its back. It spat flame at me once, but I still continued. A part of me stretched out and enveloped the bug.

By the way, I did a **[Reroll]** to dodge the flame, but it failed. Like always.

Just as I thought, that wasn't enough volume to do any meaningful damage. I went for broke and rushed at the black caterpillar, using my whole body to cover it. It resisted violently, trying to bite me.

...hmm? Didn't hurt much. Just felt like a mosquito bite. Right, my gaseous Ghost body! Fire worked, but maybe I was nearly invincible to physical attacks!

I worked to absorb as much of its life as possible before the bug could hurl flame again. In the end, it was just a caterpillar. It never attempted anything other than biting. Finally, it wailed, breathing its last.

So I won because I was smarter than a caterpillar. Amazing.

[NO NAME] [Race: Ghost] [Low Demon (Low-Rank)] 28/99

☐ A low demon made of dust and gases. A fragile spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 94/108] 17↑

[Total Combat Power: 103/119] 18↑

[Unique Skill: Reroll]

That was a lot of points. I got 10 points from the reds on my way here, so one black caterpillar was 7 points.

I could make use of these bugs. The best thing was that they didn't have any way to hurt me besides the flame. So, blacks were relatively safe to kill and gave me a good amount of points, which meant I could settle down here for a while...

...that was before I found out that there were way too few blacks, compared to the number of reds. In hindsight, it should have been obvious. Monsters had more magic and lifeforce than normal animals. To grow stronger efficiently, monsters would have to fight one another. So the higher on the pyramid, the less of them existed.

...oh well, I'd just have to be patient and search. I also got used to handling myself a bit better now, so it was time to try to see how far away I could detect presences.

I rose almost to my height limit, despite the warning signals telling me to *get back down now now now*, spreading myself as wide as I could to let my detection sense do its work.

Normally, my range was around a basketball court. This time, I expanded my perception, only checking for magic and the general sizes of the presences themselves. The details were ignored. The more useless information I took in, the worse the stress on my brain, setting me on edge and lowering my accuracy.

Alright, focus... range at baseball field size, now... yeah, still nothing... maybe a bit further... hmm? I sensed... oh crap, this is bad, my consciousness...

I forced my body and mind back together the moment they were about to scatter and evaporate. Too close! What were the developers thinking? They didn't even implement any sort of limits or safety checks for avatars! I'm pretty sure I was just about to become a vegetable right there if I didn't stop in time!

...that scared the crap out of me. Let's be more careful from now on.

At the same time, if I hadn't forced myself so, I wouldn't have found that strange presence. They were a long way away from me. The

presence only had about half my magic, yet felt strangely powerful. And bizarre. They were killing what I suspected to be black caterpillars, one after another.

Might the presence be a human? If they were killing monsters, then perhaps... a beta tester?

Chapter 7 FROM THE EYES OF A CERTAIN BETA TESTER

“Fuck yes! A grinding place just for me!”

Compared to most other mobs early game, the Black Caterpillars were particularly dangerous due to their fire-spitting. On the other hand, their soft shells made them relatively easy to kill. A young man guffawed in a forest, his sword cutting swathes through his enemies.

His name was John Yamada. It sounded like a nickname you’d use in an MMO, but sadly, that was his real name. A Japanese-American university student, he was one of the chosen beta testers. Unluckily, his professors called him to resubmit a paper, and so his first login was one whole day after the beta started.

In his panic, he created a character using his real name and face. Yamada didn’t actually mind it that much, since a lot of popular streamers were doing the same thing for their channels. To make up for the lost time, he searched for good mobs to kill, which led him to the information about the Black Caterpillars on the game forum.

In World of Yggdrasia, time passed at about the same rate as real life.

At first glance, the problem wherein some players could only login at night due to their life situation seemed unavoidable, but thankfully Yggdrasia was as large as Earth, which meant timezones. Players could choose to start in the area with the timezone they wanted.

Yamada chose the country with the same timezone as his real-life residence. A large country situated to the west of the central continent, the Seize Kingdom.

When he began the game, what surprised him first and foremost was how detailed the game was. It reminded him of the first time he used the Avatar System to sight-see another country, and the immersion he felt back then. The game was so real, he couldn’t help but think this world might actually exist.

First was the town. Yamada logged in at the Temple in Seize's capital city, then following the tutorial, went to register himself at the adventurer's guild. The amount of people he saw on the way was astonishing.

In normal open-world games, even so-called metropolises only had at most a few hundred citizens to save on computing power. Yet here, just the main street he was standing in already had more people than that walking around.

At first Yamada thought the game simply had a few thousands players logging into the same city, like some other famous MMORPGs, but then he found out they were all NPCs. This living, breathing city was populated with AI-driven non-playable characters.

He should have guessed, really. All ten thousand beta testers from throughout the whole real world couldn't have been dropped into a single country in-game. To determine how sophisticated the AI-driven NPCs were, he watched a street stall for a long while. And the owner actually began to scowl at him.

The wind on his skin, the pavement under his feet, the mouth-watering smell from a stall selling skewers of grilled meat.

All these were indistinguishable from reality.

The sense of smell was replicated, but the sense of taste only worked for drinks. Avatars had no need for food. The human controller would still need to logout and eat normally.

As a player, Yamada was provided a lump of some sort of sweet food by the Temple. It resembled nutritional energy bars and granted a buff when eaten. But those didn't dampen his dream to try out the street food here, even if just once, and even when he knew the sense of taste wouldn't work. To that end, he headed to the adventurer's guild for his first job.

But the food wasn't the only reason Yamada was trying to earn money.

This game was realism-oriented. Unlike most other MMORPGs, you didn't have an inventory box. You had to carry all your items by yourself. From what he'd heard, only some quest items could be stored inside your character. All other items took up actual space. If you had too many, you either used the Temple's storage service, or made a base somewhere.

However, what Yamada was most interested were the slaves.

He was disappointed at first to see that only Humans were playable as a race. Turned out that apparently in World of Yggdrasia, all Demihumans were slaves. If you had a somewhere to live and enough money, you could buy slaves in cities or go capture the demihumans living in the forest. They could do housework, fight, carry your burden, or serve in *other* ways.

Slavery unnerved him a little bit at first, but all the townspeople were working the demihumans without batting an eye.

The slaves were dressed cleanly enough, too, perhaps since they had to work in a city. Yamada decided to stop worrying about the matter.

Then he saw the back streets. He saw actual elves and beastmen slaves doing menial work. He saw the cute but somber girls, no one cracking a smile, and he decided his dream right there and then. He would earn enough to have a huge mansion, then he would swoop in to save the demihuman girls from their poor fates, and they would live together happily ever after.

Thus he vowed, to his own wretched heart.

This game's growth system was weird.

There were no Levels like normal RPGs. No Classes or Jobs, either – everyone were Adventurers. Players decided on their playstyle by acquiring and leveling Skills the way they wanted, with 10 being the maximum level.

[John Yamada] [Race: Human

] [Adventurer]

[Magic Points (MP): 40/40] [Hit Points (HP): 60/60]

[Strength: 10] [Vitality: 10] [Agility: 10] [Dexterity: 10]

[Swordsmanship 1] [Defense 1] [Offensive Magic 1] [Healing Magic 1] [Self-Reinforcement]

[Total Combat Power: 40]

[Magic] : Flame - Healing

All he had were his starting skills, magic, and basic equipment: an Iron One-Handed Sword, a set of Soft Leather Armor, a set of Traveler's Clothes, and an Adventurer's Backpack.

If he died, he'd lose half of his Magic Points, suffer a 10% reduction of stats, and drop all his luggage on the ground as the death penalty. However, he had heard that his starting equipment and some quest reward items wouldn't drop, so Yamada went outside town without a worry.

The way combat and gaining experience worked were also somewhat strange.

To prevent any mishaps in normal life, adventurers' bodies were no different from normal people. This only changed when they entered combat. Physical Combat Skills and Self-Reinforcement were activated by the use of magic. One MP

was spent every minute for each level of combat skill.

That meant Yamada could only fight for 40 minutes maximum. However, magic recovered by 10% each hour, and each monster killed granted you increased maximum Magic Points and Hit Points as a form of experience. You also absorbed a part of the dead monster's magic to recover your own.

Yamada, despite having only his starting stats, didn't actually have that much trouble hunting outside town. The nimble wolves were a bit difficult at first, but as long as he had a weapon, wild animals were easy enough to kill – as long as they came from the forest near the road leading out of town. But the beginning mobs didn't offer much rewards in terms of both experience and money.

The first wolf he killed was grotesquely real, too. He would've retched if the game didn't automatically censor the gory mess.

He brought a few rabbits he hunted to the adventurer's guild to sell. They complained – damaged hides, no bloodletting after the kill – and haggled the price all the way down to just 5 bronze coins (about \$5) for each rabbit. He tried out a skewer of meat from a stall and vomited from the taste of paper clay, all the while cursing the developers for their overcommitment to realism.

Yamada logged out. He searched for information on the VR message board, then went back in-game and headed to the wilds, away from the capital city.

This was an Earth-sized open-world game. Even his chosen starting country, Seize Kingdom, was as large as one of the bigger European countries. It'd take days traveling on foot.

With what little money he had left, Yamada bought a ticket for a magitech train, one of the methods of transportation available, and also one of the game's selling points. No coal or water powered this train, only plenty of magic.

To help alleviate the boredom during the ride, the game allowed players who bought a private room to either log out, or browse a version of the game forum dedicated to people wanting access from in-game.

In case you were still logged-out when the train arrived at your station, the game would send you a notification on your phone. If you were still unavailable, your next login would put you in the nearest Temple.

The ride went quickly. It was a few hours later when Yamada arrived at a rural village, somewhere in the wilds of Seize Kingdom.

Sipping on some fruit juice, the first decent thing to entered his mouth ever since he started the game, he asked a few villagers for the whereabouts of monsters. According to them, there were only wolves, rabbits, and other such wild animals near the village, but he could find some Black Caterpillars about an hour's walk into the forest. This was the mob the game forum told him about.

Incidentally, he did try to talk to a cat-eared demihuman slave along the way. She was *terrified*. That took the wind out of his sails.

Yamada bought a cheap cloak at the village's secondhand store, for appearance's sake. He headed to the depths of the forest without a single worry, his body never tiring due to being a VR avatar.

Yamada was the quintessential 'dumb' gamer – he only learned by dying. No plans, no thought. No steps taken to ensure the way back, he let his enthusiasm led him deep into the forest. And there, he found the Black Caterpillar he'd been searching for. He happily began the hunt.

[John Yamada] [Race: Human

] [Adventurer]

[Magic Points (MP): 33/52] [Hit Points (HP): 74/84]

[Strength: 13] [Vitality: 10] [Agility: 11] [Dexterity: 10]

[Swordsmanship 2] [Defense 1] [Offensive Magic 1] [Healing Magic 1] [Self-Reinforcement]

[Total Combat Power: 93] 53↑

[Magic] : Flame - Healing

The fire-breathing bugs were quite dangerous. He came close to death two or three times, but the experience was proportionate, too. Yamada's combat power jumped in just two hours of hunting. The best part was the skill **[Swordsmanship]** leveling to rank 2. Just the upgrade nearly doubled his total combat power.

According to the forum, getting from 1 to 2 wasn't that difficult, but going to 2 to 3 would take a lot of work. Ever since his power doubled, he could kill the caterpillars before they spit fire with ease. If grinding the skill was that difficult, then he could simply go in deeper to search for stronger monsters, Yamada thought. He healed himself to a decent amount and moved on.

As mentioned on the game forum, the beginner bonus item, *Identification Crystal*, would show information if there was a monster in his line of sight. It made looking for prey a lot easier. Yamada abused the item relentlessly, and he used up all 99 uses in just two hours of hunting.

True, there were *Identification Crystals* used and sold by the town residents. But they weren't the perfectly-processed spheres the bonus items were. Just rough pieces of rocks. And despite having only 10 uses, they were priced at 3 silver coins (approx. \$300 in value) each.

The actual requirements for learning **[Simple Identification]** was to use the *Identification Crystal* 80 times on targets having at minimum a certain amount of magic power. Due to the rampant misinformation on the forums, many players failed to learn the skill while they still had the bonus item. They could still check their own status at the Temple, but the inconvenience would stay with them until they

unlocked the skill.

Yamada was using his eyes, instead of his crystal, to search for mobs, when he saw a *strange white mist* approaching from the forest's depths.

“Oh?”

It looked like steam at first glance. He only realized it was a monster from the glint of light coming from inside it, which turned out to be an *Identification Crystal*. Yamada sneered.

‘Fucking hell! Damn thing must have plundered the crystal from another player!’

The white mist didn't seem to be a hostile mob, but as it drifted closer, Yamada pulled out his sword and slashed.

“Yeaahahahh!! Drop that Crystal! You're my XP now!”

The sword went through the white monster without resistance.

“Shit!”

Normally, you'd change to magic once you found out your physical attacks didn't work. Yet Yamada applied his gamer brain in the most idiotic way: he thought the monster simply had a high dodge skill. He just kept on chopping.

Strangely, the white mist stopped moving, *looking as if dumbfounded*. Then it moved, *angered*, to envelop Yamada. He kept screaming and swinging wildly for several minutes, until all his life and magic were drained.

Yamada's body scattered into particles of light. He reappeared a few seconds later in the Temple of Seize Kingdom's capital city, having not set a respawn point.

“Aww shucks, I died.”

His first defeat, yet the fool still laughed. Once again, he headed out to battle to regain his lost stats and magic points.

Fucking what.

That was an actual beta tester. I showed him my *Identification Crystal* and approached, thinking he might realize I was a player. Never in my wildest dream would I expect him to rob me.

He had my level of power, but a black caterpillar's level of intelligence. Lucky me. Never before had I felt the word

‘meathead’ to be such an apt description of someone.

I knew that when players died, their bodies disappeared and they left behind equipment. This guy just had a worn-out cloak, a few coins, and some sort of stick that looked like it was used to skewer meat.

...why skewers?

[NO NAME] [Race: Ghast] [Low Demon (Low-Rank)]

□ A low demon made of dust and gases. A fragile spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 123/130] 22↑

[Total Combat Power: 135/143] 24↑

[Unique Skill: Reroll] [Simple Identification]

Oh, yes, right. I didn't notice when, but I learned **[Identification]**.

I was finally free from the anxiety at seeing the crystal's uses dwindle, but the skill had its own problems. I could identify myself for free, but identifying anything else used up 1 point of magic. And the skill wasn't even any better than the crystal. It only ever showed the *Magic Points*, *Total Combat Power*, and the name chosen from my perception.

...really, so troublesome.

That aside, I got a lot of points from just a player character. Could it be... that killing humans was the easiest way to grow as a monster?

Chapter 8 VILLAGE DISCOVERED

Five days since the start of *World of Yggdrasia's* beta test. New

information continued to be posted and constantly updated on the VR chat forum. Efficient skill leveling, types of monsters, information on the game world's countries, etc.

[Chat Board 7 - *Please use the in-game common language]

“So yeah, instead of killing mobs willy-nilly, it's better to grind your skill with a decently strong monster.”

“But you'll just get bogged down if you have low magic. Efficiency would go to shit.”

“System's too annoying in the first place. Why do you *have* to use MP to actually use your combat skills?”

“Go use items. Don't you know about magic recovery potions, idiot?”

“That's fucking expensive. Those are one silver a pot, how the fuck do I afford that sort of drinking?!”

“It's around 6 small silvers a bottle here, in Quarancing.”

“That's dirt cheap! Where's that?”

“Lessee... Around the middle-left part of the world map, I guess? Architecture looks Eastern European-ish.”

“That's way far... I'm in Katrosvingt. Looks like an Eastern country. Other side of the map from you.”

“Hey, the world's round! You're just right next door!”

“Has anyone tried crossing continents?”

“Don't think so. Even the fastest and most expensive express ship takes at least a few weeks.”

“So do you just twiddle your thumbs while on the ship?”

“Apparently if you log out from the ship you’ll log back in there. Or if you logged out for too long, you’ll show up at the nearest Temple. Monsters attack the ship anyway, so you can level your weapon skill.”

“So pretty much only people with free time are going to travel. Also, can we fish?”

“I saw fishing gear on the market. Right, so the central continent’s medieval European style, how about the other countries? I’m at the Holy City Ayune, smack dab in the middle of the central cont. Closest country to the world tree.

Good weather’s coming soon.”

“Damn, that’s nice... If only my time zone fit with yours. I’m in Soixansept Kingdom, btw. Bottom left of world map.

Kinda like a tropical island.”

“Most convenient medieval world ever. They have flush toilets.”

“Food looks great too, but not edible. At least alcohol works fine.”

“Still no food with buffs yet, right? Can’t wait for the next update.”

“So fed up with the damn bar. It’s just sweet, nothing else.”

“Stop complaining and go eat real food. VR can’t fill your stomach.”

“Hey, anyone knows about that rumor of weird monsters recently?”

“What do you mean? How weird?”

“Lots of different types. They have different colors or special skills,

kinda like sub-species of the main one. People in other countries have been talking about that in the other chatrooms.”

“Oh yeah, I know about that. Haven’t seen them myself, but apparently they show up here and there. The adventurer’s guild has information on them now. There’s a compilation of eyewitness reports on some other website, too.”

“Like an event monster or something? Checking out that site now.”

“Ooooh, right, that might be the one that attacked my friend.”

“Hostile, then.”

“Yeah. Charged in right when it saw the party. It looked like a hobgoblin but with red skin. Friend’s party was 4 people, killed it, but lost one of their own. They told me, ‘ *It’s just a game, but I could actually feel the madness. I damn near pissed my pants*’. So weird...”

“Just checked out the website. So right now, we have info on around 10 of them. Maybe it’s actually a new event?”

“How strong are they generally? Anything new?”

“Apparently you can win with combat skill 2 or 3. Also I heard there’s this new one in the western forest of Seize Kingdom. Looks like a white mist or a ghost or something.”

[NO NAME] [Race: Ghast] [Low Demon (Low-Rank)]

□ A low demon made of dust and gases. A fragile spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 132/150] 20↑

[Total Combat Power: 145/165] 22↑

[Unique Skill: Reroll] [Simple Identification]

Two days since I fought that beta tester.

That reminded me, the beta players could only pick the Human race. Unless they had some *really* good intuition, I don't think they'd realize that monsters could be players. And I hadn't realized how desperate I'd become – I actually looked for help from just a normal player.

I did a few more tests and experiments during the two days. Didn't grow my strength much, though. The forest didn't have any other monsters aside from me and the caterpillar-type, so I wandered around and hunted some normal animals too.

Speaking of which... the human mind really is good at adapting.

It wasn't that I adapted to this body and no longer felt the sense of *disconnect*, no. It was still there. I only adapted to that feeling of disconnect itself. Like getting used to living with permanent nausea.

So I started widening my area of activity a little bit, but I only found less and less caterpillars, with normal wild animals taking their place. Rabbits, foxes, wolves, boars, birds. The foxes and birds ran away as soon as I approached. The wolves and boars I fought, and here was where I discovered that no normal beasts could harm me.

I assumed that in a straight fight, the wolves could win against red caterpillars, and the boars had a chance against the black caterpillars too, if they were allowed to charge into and crush the bugs. But unlike monsters, wild animals had little magic. They had around the same amount as the snakes I saw.

What did this mean? Monsters used magic to fight, but the wild animals' meager amount of magic only allowed them to fight purely physically.

I still received 1 and 2 damage from the black caterpillar and that player's physical attacks, but that was because they strengthened themselves with magic. I was a spiritual life-form, a Ghast with resistance to physical damage. The wild animals' unenhanced strikes couldn't harm me.

Which meant the snakes might actually have been a kind of newborn monsters, not wild animals, since they did use magic.

In the end, I was barely getting any stronger, despite my wholesale murder of the fauna.

Back to the present. What was I doing? Well, I was busy getting chased by armed people.

“That way!”

“Over there!”

“My turn! **[Stone Bolt] !**”

Holy crap was that close! I only *just* managed to hide myself behind a tree trunk scant moments before the rock bullet bounced off the bark. The projectile looked like a normal rock, but it was magic, which meant it could hurt me just fine. I had actual proof.

Three humans wielding swords and staves were my opponents.

They could have been normal NPC adventurers, but players were much more likely to be the kind of people who would charge this deep into the forest so thoughtlessly.

[Young Man in Swordsman Equipment] [Race: Human

] [Adventurer]

[Magic Points (MP): 55/65] [Hit Points (HP): 118/120]

[Total Combat Power: 145]

[Young Woman(?) in Magician Equipment] [Race: Human

] [Adventurer]

[Magic Points (MP): 57/75] [Hit Points (HP): 58/80]

[Total Combat Power: 144]

[Young Man(?) in Warrior Equipment] [Race: Human

] [Adventurer]

[Magic Points (MP): 63/70] [Hit Points (HP): 94/110]

[Total Combat Power: 148]

The swordsman’s appearance looked truthful enough, but I had a feeling the magician lady was fudging her age. And the warrior’s movements looked somehow disjointed. My hunch told me he was

actually fat in real life.

We'd been playing tag in the forest, and obviously, I wasn't any closer to victory. All of them had around the same power as me, with at least one confirmed magician. I didn't know if the others also had spells.

The unfamiliar forest hampered their steps quite a bit, but then again, my best speed was only about a power walker's. I couldn't lose them, and they couldn't catch me.

...really, would you people please stop? Moving at this speed was dizzying the crap out of me.

So you must be wondering how I got into this mess. Well, after that fight with the meathead player, I wandered here and there, partially to watch for other beta players, partially to look for more black caterpillars. It was then that I found a small farming village.

My curiosity spurred me to get closer...no no no, I wasn't going to attack the people. Really. Just the large cattles, like a cow or a horse. Maybe they'll give me some good experience. I just wanted to test it out.

I thought it'd be an old, poor village. Instead, the farming community actually seemed quite well-off. However, the farmhands weren't human, but... elves, I supposed? Elves and beastmen with dog ears and cat ears. They showed no liveliness, no vigor in their work, their necks bound by some strange-looking collars.

Who were these people? Slaves? Some human came along once in a while, at times to give orders, at times to give the slaves some steamed potato and soup. So it actually wasn't as bad as it could be, but in the end, the only ones not working were the humans.

I was curious about them, or to be more precise, about their animal ears and tails. I approached to try to get a closer look, but just as I neared the fields, I hit something invisible. It gave me a jolt and pushed me away.

What was that? It even damaged me a little bit. I stayed rooted on the spot, confused. A few moments later, some armed farmers began to show up from the building, so I panicked and ran away.

They were just normal villagers. I was sure I could take them, but it would get much too troublesome if they sent soldiers to hunt me down.

The farmers stopped chasing me once I entered the forest. Relieved, I decided to continue hunting some animals in the nearby woods and wait until the heat dies down. It was then that I met the group of three. They suddenly attacked the moment they found me.

And so here I was, running off deeper and deeper into the forest. Yet the group didn't even think twice before giving chase. They didn't seem to care about how they'd get back out again.

Damn, that rock again! Why the hell wasn't the magician running out of magic? Was she taking drugs? And another one-oh crap, she's readying some fire this time!

Right. That. Is. Enough!

[Reroll]

The flame blazing at the end of her staff exploded. The woman wailed, in surprise and pain.

Wait, what? Did I just *Reroll* the magician's spell? I can actually use the skill on someone else?

...Oh, wait, crap.

[NO NAME] [Race: Ghast] [Low Demon (Low-Rank)]

☐ A low demon made of dust and gases. A fragile spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 65/150]

[Total Combat Power: 72/165]

[Unique Skill: Reroll] [Simple Identification]

My magic just plummeted from the improper use of my unique skill.

Damn it, I couldn't engage them any longer. All three of them were too surprised to continue giving chase, so I took the chance to run off.

Right, looked like I lost them. Still, I kept on gaining distance, cutting through the forest without rest. Not like I could ever get tired.

I killed whatever caterpillars and animals I encountered along the way. After a whole three days of constant travel without stopping, I found a simple, primitive hamlet, hidden deep inside the forest.

AN:

World map of Yggdrasia. Red numbers are large countries, black numbers are small ones.



TN: Obvious author typo in map, just ignore it. Here's the [direct link](#) in case the image was too small.

Chapter 9 FIRST CONTACT

I found a small settlement hidden deep behind the leaves.

At first glance, the dwellings weren't much better than large tents draped with leaves for camouflage. There were three such tents. Three families, about ten people.

Certain spaces, such as the kitchen, the wood chopping block, or the butcher table, were communal. All were outside.

I caught a few glimpses of the villagers. All was wearing simple flax tunics and leather boots. They lived a simple life, at one with nature.

I couldn't try to make contact. I had the common language jammed into my brain, but I couldn't actually speak. And just look at me now – normal animals and humanoid NPCs would just run away from me. I had better chances with players.

Well, I was a type of demon, really, that shouldn't be surprising.

Still, I wanted to continue watching them. Just a bit more.

I couldn't approach the hamlet, but my guess was that they didn't have the barrier thing.

I wanted to *relax*. Somehow, someday. My spirit was being beaten black and blue by the constant unease, like pins and needles in my brain; by the feeling of extreme disconnect to reality; and by so many other things. I was getting used to the feeling itself bit by bit, but I feared that after I'd completely adapted myself to it, going back to reality would drive me insane.

Actually, *why* did these people decided to live all the way over here?

The world was so real I forgot it was a game sometimes, but they were NPCs. Did they have a particular reason to live here? Did the developers expect the players to go in this deep?

I thought, *this could be an event*, and approached as close as I dared, then I understood why they were living here. They were elves.

That reminded me of the guide's words. It said there were ninety-nine

human countries around the ninety-nine saplings.

Did that mean anyone not human were living in places so remote? I heard human civilization here were rather developed, with trains and everything. So there was quite the economic inequality here.

If this world was as big as Earth, then the developers wouldn't bother manually placing every villages and settlements.

This hamlet was probably randomly generated.

Oh hey, there was a kid. A boy, about 5 years old. The only other kids in this settlement were babies, so the boy was playing alone, looking rather forlorn.

...oh god I want to meet him. I want to meet him *so bad!*

I never had the best impression of adults and people my age. The only exceptions were little kids.

Was there a way to make him not wary of me...? I couldn't think of any. Oh, wait. There was those items that player dropped. Maybe I could use them.

One old, un-dyed cloak.

Three small coins, and a few coins of another type. They looked like they were made from silver and copper, respectively.

A wooden stick that looked like a meat skewer.

And the *Identification Crystal 5/99* I had since the beginning, plus one dark-red caterpillar fang.

...I could become the most suspicious-looking person ever.

Anyway, first time for everything. Let's try wearing the cloak. Come... on... god, this is hard. Using my dry-ice smoke as hands was really difficult.

It took me a few more minutes to realize that without fingers, I couldn't do any fine manipulation. I used nearly an hour just to put the cloak on my body.

...aaand the cloak just slipped through my Ghast body... why?

I could use my body to 'pick up' things. It was actually more like enveloping them, but it worked. I could hold small items like the crystal or coins within me, and they didn't drop. It just felt like holding onto a purse (which meant that if I was surprised, I'd drop the stuff).

The cloak was big, but I could pick it up as long as I enveloped around half of it. It felt like balancing a tray with a dish of soup on top – difficult, but still possible. And of course I'd still drop it if anything happened.

So I *could* pick it up. I thought that meant I could wear it too, yet it didn't work. That was one hour stressing my little brain out. Give me back my time. Really...

Normally, monster avatars like mine were only capable of basic, preset actions, like how a normal game character could only do the actions bound on your keyboard. I'd had the chance to use VR a few times before. I'd seen swimming people who sank like rocks in real life, and martial arts masters without a single day of training. Those were all preset actions.

It could be that this game's developers were also having us alpha testers evaluate what actions were possible for monster avatars, in addition to their stated purpose.

...I should calm down. I felt like I just spent a frustrating hour crocheting with two left feet. I rested, enjoying the debilitating dizziness from seeing beautiful nature with 360 degrees fullscreen vision. After a few hours of incapacitation, I finally found the strength to face reality again.

Oh yes, Ghosts could shapeshift, right? Could I do humanoid shapeshifting?

I thought my current body was a lot nimbler than my previous, doughy one. I had more volume now, I should be able to look like a small kid, at least.

Alright, let's try.

...
.....
.....
.....

Greetings, everyone. It's a beautiful new day today.

True, I could work this body similarly to my previous one. I could stretch and shrink, spread and cover, and more. But that didn't translate to having complete freedom over my shape.

When I focused on a part to shapeshift, the parts of me I no longer focus on started to *warp* and *pop*. Shifting one part a centimeter caused it to somehow stretch by a whole meter. And I had to fight against my own gaseous body constantly drifting and changing by itself.

All those problems took up a huge amount of my time. My mind was being tortured by the feeling of becoming a mass of sticky mud, but I persevered through. Had I manage to ignore the distress in my moment of extreme focus?

Anyway, at about sunrise, I finally managed to assume a humanoid shape, just about as big as that elven boy, alabaster in color and waxy in texture. One problem: my 'skin' was constantly melting and dripping.

...what the hell was I? A new type of monster? I couldn't even fathom how to make contact with people, looking like this.

Let's think about that later. I should try to move. This should be simple: just move the way I moved my real body. Easy!

Oh, sweet naiveté, past me of a few minutes ago. How you underestimated this game.

Imagine this: you had a human statue, carefully built with iron sand, on a table. And you were only allowed to move it with 10 magnets, all held by different arms behind the statue, without letting it collapse.

Impossible. Nope.

And my brain was wailing at me, too. It was screaming from the feeling of extreme disconnect, born from moving a humanoid body

with inhuman means. My vision twisted and turned.

[NO NAME] [Race: Ghast] [Low Demon (Low-Rank)]

☐A low demon made of dust and gases. A fragile spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 160/160] 10↑

[Total Combat Power: 176/176] 11↑

[Unique Skill: Reroll] [Simple Identification] [Humanoid Form (Terrible)]

...and before I knew it, I had a new weird skill. What was this...

[Humanoid Form (Terrible)]

☐Transformation of a non-human thing into something humanoid.

[Identification] gave me pretty much what I expected.

Also, I was *really* bothered by this one thing. By ‘Terrible’, did it mean the skill was at the lowest level, or was it insulting my sculpting skill?

Anyway, so that’s another thing to practice daily – holding humanoid form. I should learn how to walk first. Currently, I was taking more than a minute just to move forward a step.

I practiced until the sun set that day, all the while fighting against the nausea. My sculpting still hadn’t gotten any better, so in the end I switched over to intensive training on wearing the cloak, all the way until morning. Again.

...what am I even doing with my life.

*

We met when the elven boy was picking fruits and dried branches right near his village.

“...who are you?” He asked timidly, but he hadn’t bolt immediately. That’s good. If he had, I was ready to turn back into gas and ran right away. Also, three cheers for the common language.

Alright, first step cleared. Judging from the way he looked, he wasn’t afraid of me.

I looked about as tall as him at the moment, wearing an oversized coat, the hood hiding my face. Even I had to admit I looked suspicious as all hell. I'd have run away if I saw me.

Coming here, it took me ten seconds just to walk a single step, so really, I was super grateful for the kid's courage... or maybe NPCs were just that way.

"...do you need me for something?" He asked.

I didn't. Despite all the effort I put into making contact with him, I actually didn't.

At any rate, I tried to tilt my head... okay, this was difficult. Couldn't afford to traumatize him by messing up and looking like an eldritch abomination, though. I tried, somehow managing the gesture.

"You can't speak?" He looked concerned.

I nodded a fraction. He stepped forward. I frantically shook my head, and he stopped.

"I shouldn't get close?"

I nodded, affirming. Once again, he looked concerned. I know, right? I wouldn't know what to do with a kid who didn't speak, didn't allow anyone to get close, and didn't show their face, either.

I just wanted to look at the boy close-up. I never had any plans beyond that.

He went silent, deep in thought. After a while, he nodded, seeming to have come to a conclusion.

"...so, I was helping mom out," he suddenly started talking about himself, "Dad hunts, and he sometimes brings back monsters too. They look like black caterpillars, but really tasty."

Oh? Those were edible?

He continued picking dried branches, talking while keeping a 10 meters distance with me. The work was done a while after. He fidgeted, adjusting his basket full of branches and fruits on his back, and looked at me.

“...hey, umm, I’m going back home. Can we meet again tomorrow?” he suggested a most wonderful idea.

I nodded.

“Alright, tomorrow then! I have to go home now, or mom would scold me. We were running from the slave hunters, so I’m not allowed to get back late.” he replied with a beaming smile.

I tried to wave as best as I could. He cheerfully returned with a wave of his own and ran towards to village. Als these days were really amazing. It felt just like talking with a real human.

So, slave hunters... Those collared elves and beastmen I saw back then were actual slaves, then.

I reached my limits just as the boy disappeared from my sight. I poofed back into gas, then hurried into the forest depths.

Weren’t skills supposed to be handled by the system, normally? My brain been doing all the work ever since the beginning here.

I allowed myself to relax. This was interesting, but really stressful. At least I knew a lot more now.

Even NPCs – adult elves, in this case – could hunt the black caterpillars, despite their strength not seemingly that high.

[Adult Elf] [Race: Elf

] [Villager?]

[Magic Points (MP): 50/50] [Hit Points (HP): 60/60]

[Total Combat Power: 63]

About the same as the black bug, and the same as me just before my evolution. I supposed that was why they could survive here, in this forest.

I’d been practicing my humanoid form for two days straight already. I should get back to hunting, but after knowing their food situation, I was much more reluctant to continue staying here. Was there something for me to hunt further away?

Recent events had shown me the need to be much more cautious,

which was why I'd been heavily scouting. And a few organized magical signals was pinging on my radar.

They were... humans? Wait a minute, don't tell me that kid's talk about slave hunters just caused a game event to start?

Chapter 10 SLAVE HUNTERS

I detected a few magical signals approaching the small elven settlement, most likely humans. Combined with the word

‘slave hunters’ I heard, I had a bad feeling about this.

I headed towards them. An hour later at normal walking speed, I saw nine humans.

They... probably weren’t beta players.

Dirty, unkempt looks, ratty leather coats. Unlike the players I met before, they weren’t paying much attention to their appearance. Of course, they might be players roleplaying as bandits, but I doubted that. It had only been 10 days since the game started. I didn’t think those kind of roleplayers would show up so soon.

I got as close as I dare, to take a closer look on their equipment.

They had more handaxes and bows than swords, plus plenty of ropes on their belts. Only one looked like a magician. That one was fiddling with a choker.

...that was way more evidence than I ever asked for.

Let’s assume they were truly slave hunters.

If this game event happened due to the kid’s talk about slave hunters, then their target must be the elven settlement.

Maybe they were a group of simple animal hunters making a living. The ropes were to capture large animals like deers, the magician was fiddling with that choker because he was bored... yeah, I know, that was a stretch even by my standard.

So then, what do I do?

My original goal was to gain strength and survive until the end of the alpha test, for ten years of life and a new identity.

The experiment’s goal was to investigate the mental stress of the ‘disconnect’ born from using a monster avatar extremely different from the human body. There was no need for me to clear the game.

Being slaves did not necessarily mean being mistreated. The elven villagers were just NPCs, there was no need for me to care...

Sorry, I lied. I cared a *ton*.

I might have become a lot more apathetic to sapient life ever since my mental health started plummeting, but I had *met* this boy. I'd *talked* to him. I couldn't let anything bad happen to him.

There were two choices here.

One, I warn the village of the danger... if only I could speak. I could try to threaten them, but what if their programming didn't allow them to run? Then I'd be their enemy.

Two, I deal with these people before they could find the settlement... well, they wouldn't be here if they didn't know where it was already. Before they could approach the settlement, then.

I couldn't just chase them away. I needed to *make sure they never come back*.

I didn't know if I could even win here, though.

[Magician x1] [Race: Human

] [Slave Hunter]

[Magic Points (MP): 65/65] [Hit Points (HP): 48/48]

[Total Combat Power: 86]

[Hunter x3] [Race: Human

] [Slave Hunter]

[Magic Points (MP): 40/40] [Hit Points (HP): 70/70]

[Total Combat Power: 70]

[Goon x5] [Race: Human

] [Slave Hunter]

[Magic Points (MP): 30/30] [Hit Points (HP): 60/60]

[Total Combat Power: 57]

Unsurprisingly, they were weaker than beta players. But they still had around the same power as a black caterpillar, plus human intelligence and magic. They weren't exactly easy opponents. Intelligence was what allows one to defeat more powerful enemies, and was the reason why humans were so scary. Yet that was still no reason for me to retreat here.

...but what if they weren't actually slave hunters? As soft as I was, I couldn't act until I was 100% sure. I made plans to confirm.

First off, I used [**Humanoid Form** (Terrible)] – a skill in name only, as what should have been processed by the system was all offloaded to my brain – to turn humanoid, then wore the cloak.

I approached, then stopped hiding myself when I was close enough and started walking towards them, taking several seconds for a single step.

The day was nearly over. I supposed the (probable) slave hunters were planning on making camp until morning.

“Hey! There's something over there!”

As I moved closer, the one keeping a lookout shouted to his fellows.

Yes, there's something here all right. Look, I'm a defenseless kid wandering around in the dark...

The magician tilted his head, looked at me, then smirked.

“My, a kid found us. That won't do, that won't do at all. Hey, folks, don't let him escape. The more elven kids we get, the better. They fetch a high price among our more... *degenerate* buyers.”

“Yeah!” “Got it.”

Two of the goons cracked their knuckles and loosened their shoulders. They approached, looking like this was just another chore to be done, but their leering smiles betrayed their excitement.

...guilty as charged.

The forest was darkening, and the goons weren't expecting trouble. I

shot my body out from the coat's sleeves and covered their faces.

“Wha?!” “Smoke?!”

They panicked. I absorbed their life force as fast as I could. Their comrades still hadn't realized anything was wrong, with me hidden behind the goons in the gloomy forest.

Seeing the two men desperately waving hands in front of their faces, the rest of them stood, finally alarmed. “What happened?”

The two goons gurgled and dropped to the ground. The magician started, eyes wide open.

“Get away from that kid! That's a monster!”

Whoops. But I got two of them!

[NO NAME] [Race: Ghast] [Low Demon (Low-Rank)]

□A low demon made of dust and gases. A fragile spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 168/176] 16↑

[Total Combat Power: 185/194] 18↑

[Unique Skill: Reroll] [Simple Identification] [Humanoid Form (Terrible)]

Plenty of new magic for me. A moment later, an arrow pierced through me.

“Did that kill it?!” A hunter shouted

You killed some air. It tingled a bit, at most. I abandoned my cloak and flew at him.

“Aaaargh!!!”

“Get away from it! That must be a Wraith! Load up your magitools with magic stones, now!”

“No, no, no! Save me!”

The magician merciless set fire on both the enveloped hunter and me.

Damn if it wasn't hot! But I held on, sucking out his last wisps of life. He shriveled up, sowing even more confusion among the men.

They just finished putting some sort of black stones into their bows. I assumed those were the 'magic stones' and

'magitools'. Some sort of enchanted weapons. Those *would* probably be able to inflict damage on my barely-tangible body, but I had already moved before the men could do anything.

Towards the goons unequipped with anything effective.

"It's coming here!" "Stay away! Stay away!"

Humans had more magic than wild animals, so they could still barely hurt me. However, I had more around triple their combat power. I had nothing to worry from them.

"C-Come on, fiend! S-See how you like this!"

In his fear and confusion, one of the more tough-looking goons drew his dirty short sword.

"Watch out! One of the Wraith's ability is to cause fear!" The magician's voice rang out.

Well. I wasn't a wraith, but close enough, I supposed.

The sword-wielding goon swung his sword in wild abandon – apparently just seeing me was enough to terrorize him. I absorbed all his life force in one go.

[NO NAME] [Race: Ghast] [Low Demon (Low-Rank)]

[Magic Points: 158/191] 15↑

[Total Combat Power: 177/210] 18↑

My maximum magic went up from killing the hunter and the goons, but my combat power went down from all the damage.

Ow-shit! The hunters used their bows!

The goons tried to run from me. I caught up, then used them as meat

shields.

But the hunters no longer cared about friendly fire. One of the arrows pierced clean through a goon's neck. He gurgled and went down.

If they weren't worrying about their own comrades, then neither need I. I snatched up the last of his dwindling life.

[NO NAME] [Race: Ghast] [Low Demon (Low-Rank)]

[Magic Points: 149/193] 2↑

[Total Combat Power: 168/212] 2↑

Eh? I got almost nothing. Might be because he was nearly dead, might be because someone else killed him.

There were more important things to worry about. Mainly, that there was still half of them left, while my combat power had dropped too much. One magician, two hunters, one goon... All the strong ones were left. Damn.

“Fucking useless dumbasses! What the fuck am I paying you for?! Kill that thing!”

“But Boss, it's strong!” “We lost too many of us. Let's retreat!”

“Shut the fuck up! The nobles wanted us to bring back young girls and elven kids! We *can't* go back like this!”

Oh, I see... They wanted elven children slaves. A part of me understood that this was just a game event, that they were just NPCs, but the rest of me was too busy being incensed.

The group kept shooting and the magician kept throwing fire even as they argued. I ignored the hits and attacked the weakest one first.

“Nooooo, stay away, stay awaaaaaay!!!”

“Stay, you maggot! Stay and keep it still! The rest, keep shooting!”

“Don't hate us, alright? You were just unlucky,” one of the hunters clicked his tongue.

Yeah, sure, don't hold a grudge for *being sacrificed*. But considering it was me they were sacrificing to, it wasn't really my place to say anything.

The goon hysterically ran about, and I chased after my future meat shield. Then one of the hunters shot through his leg.

The goon screamed.

“Good job! **[Fire Bolt]**!”

There weren't anywhere for me to hide, now. The magician shot a bullet of flame at me.

[Reroll]

The mass of flame exploded in front of me. Freaking hot! At least *it wasn't a direct hit*. I could bear with this.

“What?!”

I used the flame as a smokescreen and attacked the bow-wielding hunter closest to me.

It wasn't really anything amazing. I just stretched out a part of me and tried to ‘parry’ the bullet of fire away, for a lack of a better term. I couldn't afford to fail there, so I used **[Reroll]** to raise my chances of success. It worked, the spell's damage was reduced by half, and I could get moving right away after the parry.

The hunters were fast, but not the one carelessly believing I was down from the fire. I landed a clean grab on him. He rolled and writhed around, desperately trying to dislodge me.

“Stay right there! This is our chance!”

“Boss, stop!”

The magician was about to burn the both of us like he did with the goon, and *this time* the other hunter took offense to that. I took the chance to absorb the life of the downed hunter post-haste.

“I am your employer! Shut up and follow my fucking orders!”

“We accepted because we were promised a few elves of our own, *not*

to get fucking killed by a fucking *dumbass!*”

The magician screamed in incoherent rage. He readied a particularly powerful fire spell, to be cast at the hunter.

Here’s my chance!

[Reroll]

I forced the spell to fail, and it exploded right on their heads. They howled in pain and stumbled, faces held in hands.

The magician losing his calm probably contributed to my own success with the skill. Also, I confirmed that using the skill on someone else drove up the cost immensely. I felt like I just lost almost half my magic in one go.

[NO NAME] [Race: Ghast] [Low Demon (Low-Rank)]

[Magic Points: 63/193]

[Total Combat Power: 82/212]

I absorbed the last dregs of life from the nearly-mummified hunter, then went on to envelop both the magician and the final hunter all at once. My combat power was low, my movement was sluggish, and I was getting quite irritated.

“W-Wha-”

“Damn wraith! Stop!”

Screw you, I wasn’t a wraith.

“Guurgh...”

“Fuck! **[Fire]**!”

The hunter went limp nearly immediately, but the magician’s high magic power took time to completely absorb. He burned me as I clinged on his face, scorching my life. I held on.

The spells he used only helped me empty his magic faster. A few seconds later, he finally slumped on the ground. The battle was over.

With victory, relief washed over me. I only barely won. I'd been on tenterhooks the whole fight, and it ended with me having only a sliver of health left. Too dangerous.

[NO NAME] [Race: Ghast] [Low Demon (Low-Rank)]

☐A low demon made of dust and gases. A fragile spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 27/238] 45↑

[Total Combat Power: 50/262] 69↑

[Unique Skill: Reroll] [Simple Identification] [Humanoid Form (Terrible)]

[Rank-up Available]

My maximum power grew a bunch, but I was as weak as the day I began the game. I still couldn't believe I won... wait a minute... *rank-up*?!

...more weird stuff.

This... wasn't evolution? Well, whatever, that was for future me to think about. Current me was feeling too drained, my mind heavily abused from the exertion of the fight and the lack of magic.

So, the village. Should be pretty safe now... oh, right. That one goon with his leg shot was still alive.

I honestly wasn't all that keen on killing someone defenseless, but if he report back, there'd be *more* slave hunters coming. So I made up my mind. I slowly rose. The goon quivered, watching me with fear evident in his eyes.

Then an arrow went through his chest, and another into the ground beneath me.

What?! I expanded my consciousness to scout for threats. Several adult elves emerged from the forest depths, bows pointing towards me warily.

...oh boy. What do I do?

Author's Note: The fights still seem low-key, but that's only for the moment. We'll be getting to the big booms sooner or later.

A bit of exposition for **[Reroll]** :

Actions have a fixed 3% chance of being a critical failure.

Chances of success for physical attacks are lowered by the opponent's dodge rate. Magic-like effects can vary in power, is modified by the opponent's resistance plus other factors, but they only rarely fail completely.

However, one trait is shared among all demon-types: the ability to cause fear to living beings. When a demon is feared by a weaker opponent, for each rank the demon possesses, the opponent's success rate drops by 10%.

The Reroll skill also has ranks. At its current rank, the protagonist can use it twice in a row. The skill consumes 10 magic each time it fails. If it succeeds, and if the skill was used on a target that wasn't the skill user, it consumes an amount of magic according to the power difference between the target and the user. And of course, rerolling *can* fail every single time.

Chapter 11 A NEW NAME

I fought to prevent the hunters from reaching the elven village, and now the villagers were pointing their arrows at me.

They likely found out about the battle from all the fire magic and the shouting. And it seemed like they realized the men were slave hunters, judging from the arrow through the goon's chest.

Three men. Likely, they were all the fighting force the settlement could muster.

[Adult Elf x3] [Race: Elf

] [Hunter]

[Magic Points (MP): 50/50] [Hit Points (HP): 60/60]

[Total Combat Power: 63]

The women had to stay back for their kids. Against 9 slavers, the settlement would've had no hope..

And now they had to contend with a single *monster* who wiped the floor with those slavers.

Yes, hello, it's me. No wonder they were on guard. The bow-wielding elves weren't so much wary as they were *terrified*.

Likely, it was the reason why they didn't shoot me directly – instead of risking my anger with a hit, they were warning me that they had their eyes on me, that I'd better go somewhere else. No, not a warning. A *plea*.

Okay, fine...

I drifted off, as non-confrontational as possible. The elves still had their bows trained on me, but relief was clear on their faces. I continued moving deeper into the forest. Once they disappeared from my sight, I hurried upwards to the canopy of a nearby tree and let loose a sigh of relief of my own.

God, I thought I almost had a *heart attack*... Well, my body was in cold sleep, but still.

I barely had any magic left. If their bows were magically enchanted, a volley could have killed me.

[NO NAME] [Race: Ghast] [Low Demon (Low-Rank)]

☐ A low demon made of dust and gases. A fragile spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 24/238]

[Total Combat Power: 47/262]

[Unique Skill: Reroll] [Simple Identification] [Humanoid Form (Terrible)]

[Rank-up Available]

I practically had one foot in the grave already.

Now, this Rank-up thing. I understood that it was different from an evolution. Did it mean becoming a stronger kind of Ghast, then? I couldn't even begin to imagine what the result would be.

Well, let's try some **[Identification]**.

[Rank-up Available]

☐ Transform into a higher-ranking race.

Exactly what it said on the tin, then.

I supposed ranking up would make me immobile again? This *probably* wasn't going to be as large a change as evolving, so I might as well try...

Just as well that my magic was near empty, then. If ranking up put my magic back to 1 again, it wouldn't make much of a difference. And I should be getting as strong as I can, in preparations for any more unforeseen battles.

I started the process.

.....

.....

...

Morning of the next day. My magic was back to full. He should be out helping his family around this time, so I headed towards where we promised to meet.

The rank-up worked, nothing particularly noteworthy happened. Didn't have to recover my magic back from 1, and my body didn't change much, either. At most, the gas just looked a little thicker. I moved somewhat better in **[Humanoid Form]** now, so that was good.

After last night, perhaps the elven boy wouldn't even show up.

On the way, I detoured to where the fight happened to recover my cloak. It was still there, for some reason, but the corpses were gone. Perhaps the elves buried them, perhaps just throwing the corpses somewhere far away, or perhaps like most other games, corpses disappeared after a certain amount of time. At any rate, it had been a whole night. The elves should have gone back home.

I arrived, peeking into the meeting spot from behind a tree. The boy was standing there, alone, a few fruits stuffed in his pockets.

Hey now, that's very dangerous. A little kid all alone in the forest. What if there were monsters?

I turned humanoid, wore the cloak, and moved towards him. He flashed a smile the moment he saw me.

"Hey. You're here."

Yes, I am.

I ceased my sluggish steps and waved. He didn't get any closer. Good, seemed like he remembered our talk yesterday, as one-sided as it was. He looked relieved, but at the same time, grimaced slightly.

Hmm, what's this? He looked... somewhat different? Ah, right, no basket on his back today. Why?

"Umm... So, uh... We'll be leaving this place soon..." The boy said, forcing the words.

What? I asked him with a head-tilt.

"Some scary humans came yesterday. They were slave hunters. The grown-ups said we'd ran away from them once, when I was younger,

but they found us again.”

Yeah, but I dealt with them, though?

“And then this ‘white monster’ killed them all. It’s dangerous to live here now, so we’re leaving.”

...right.

I supposed I shouldn’t be surprised. No slavers could be as scary as a monster.

“H-Hey,” the boy interrupted my thoughts, his voice resolute, “You killed those bad people, right? You must be this forest’s elemental spirit, I knew you were!”

...what?

“I told the grown-ups so, but they didn’t believe me. They said you were a scary monster. But I know that’s not true, I *know* you’re a good elemental!”

No no no, I was *worse* than monsters. I was a *demon*.

“Sorry, I have to go soon... Ah, can you tell me your name?”

I thought you knew I couldn’t speak?

I tried to pantomime my muteness, pointing fingers towards my mouth and shaking my head with jerky movements, like a puppet on strings. Realization dawned on the boy’s face.

“I see! You don’t have a name yet! Alright, I’ll name you then!”

...no, seriously, what?

“Let’s see... Right, there was this elven legend about elementals living on cold mountains called *shedim* [1](#). And you’re like the white snow, too! So I’ll call you Shedy! It’s perfect!”

Hey, no, wait, what about my opinion...

The naming seemed to have satisfied him. He gave a few vigorous wipes of his face with the shirt’s sleeves, hiding tearful eyes, and before I could do anything, ran off towards the hamlet.

“I’ll see you again, Shedy! I’ll come find you once I get older! I

promise!" he turned around and spoke to me for the last time.

I gave a wordless cry.

The elven boy, born and raised in the forest, disappeared in scant moments. He hadn't even told me his name.

I wasn't an actual elemental, nor was I living in this forest. I *could* follow him, but after that farewell full of emotions, it'd be awkward as all hell if I just show up in front of him again so soon.

He was an elf in the first place. How many years would it take for him to grow up? Time passed at the same rate both within and without the game, right?

Such a pity. I finally found a spot of solace in the kid, and now he's leaving.

Well, whatever... I got more information, and the rank-up strengthened me. That was good enough.

[Shedy] [Race: White Ghast] [Low Demon (High-Rank)]

□A low demon made of dust and gases. An intelligent spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 300/300] 62↑

[Total Combat Power: 330/330] 68↑

[Unique Skill: Reroll] [Racial Skill: Fear]

[Simple Identification] [Humanoid Form (Crude)]

...I suddenly had a craving for canned white asparagus. So weird. And I had a name, now...

Managed to dropped one of the 'low' in my rank, plus the 'fragile' in my description... was this the actual starting point for monsters?

New racial skill, more magic, more strength, and I think I could move faster now. The 'Terrible' in my shapeshifting skill turned into 'Crude'. That's... better, right? So I guessed it really wasn't the rank of the skill, but an evaluation of my own design skill.

I tested it out. Driving my humanoid body used to feel like moving

iron sand with magnets; now it felt like pulling puppet strings instead. I still only looked like a human if you squint *really* hard, though.

Before, I could only barely hold my form into a melting wax statue. Now, the melting had stopped, and I felt like I had actual joints. Still wasn't good enough to appear in front of other people without my cloak.

But I had a more important problem – that wasn't to say that my waxy look *wasn't* a problem, mind you.

For some reason, my bipedal form now had long, droopy ears.

I had had bullies picking on me since a long time ago, and one of their nicknames for me had been 'Rabbit', for my white hair and red eyes. Yes, okay, sure, but that was *not* a good reason for me to be *growing rabbit ears*.

1. In Jewish mythology, *shedim* was a kind of spirit or demon. Several sources gave conflicting descriptions, but [this](#)

[particular one](#) stood out for the similarities to this novel:

“...In Nahmanides’ opinion the demons (shedim) are to be found in waste (shedudim), ruined, and cold places such as in the North. They were not created out of the four elements but only out of fire and air. They have subtle bodies, imperceptible by the human senses, and these subtle bodies allow them to fly through fire and air. Because they are composed of different elements, they come under the laws of creation and decay and they die like human beings. Their sustenance is derived from water and fire, from odors and saps; hence necromancers burned incense to demons. Despite the element of subtle fire which they contain, they are surrounded by a coldness that frightens off the exorcisers (this detail is singled out only in later sources)...”

Chapter 12 SECRET ALPHA TESTERS

“Secret alpha tester No. 44. Time elapsed: 317 hours, 18 minutes. Cessation of neural activity confirmed. As per procedure, requesting dispatch of disposal team.”

“Secret alpha tester No. 62 and No. 71. Time elapsed: 317 hours, 20 minutes. Confirmed logout from mental collapse. As per procedure, requesting transport to the collection facility.”

“Secret alpha tester No. 99. Signs of mental collapse confirmed after evolving to the second stage.”

The 7th research center was monitoring the alpha test subjects within the MMORPG, *World of Yggdrasia*. Monotonous announcements of the test subjects’ terrible fates rang out, one after another.

At the 100 hours mark, ten percent had dropped out. Once the subjects began to reach their first evolutions, the number of survivors plummeted.

It was the 13th day since the start of the experiment. Seven subjects died from cessation of brain activity. Thirty-one in a vegetative state after their mental collapses and subsequent forced logouts.

“Oh wow, a bunch of them at once.” Brian said, bemused.

This man was the deputy director of the 7th research center. The actual director was an ex-politician appointed to the position through a revolving door, and so the facility’s leader was effectively Brian himself.

His secretary-cum-researcher nodded and replied softly, “Our psychologists proposed the following theory to explain for the occurrence: these particular subjects had chosen to start with demihuman and animal-type avatars, which had basic actions programmed. However, upon evolution and reaching the second stage, their avatars lost most of the programmed actions, only retaining the bare basics, due to their shapes and range of movements being incongruent to normal living beings. The mental pressure compounded with the Disconnect to elevate their distress and fear, and this could have quickened their collapse of the psyche.”

“Right. So did the doctors mention any solution?”

“Yes. According to the medical team, the easiest solution would be medication, or log the subjects out and stabilize their minds. The game development department suggested analyzing the action feedback from the subjects in order to update the programmed movements for monster avatars as soon as possible.”

“So only impractical solutions, then,” Brian chuckled.

Investigating the limits of mental stress that the human mind could handle was one of their purposes, that was true, but not the most important one.

Put a person with a broken ego into a monster vessel, and chances are high operation of the avatar would be near optimal.

To investigate how much mental stress resulted from what actions, it was most efficient to push the subjects’ minds as much as possible. Nearly 40% had dropped out after just 13 days, despite the original plan calling for half a year. At the same time, the results they gained was commensurate. The top brass was *very* satisfied with their progress.

The project’s next test subjects would be actual soldiers. Partially to prepare for them, and partially since the center had managed to acquire test subjects with no official presence in society, Brian planned on squeezing every last drop of *science* from the orphans.

“Right, aren’t there still a few stable ones?”

“Yes, Deputy Director. We retain seventeen relatively stable subjects. However, the majority of them were laying low, far away from human civilization, only barely active.”

“Well, we can’t have that. Ideas to deal with the problem?”

“Reports from the data processing department said they’ve been leaking the testers’ locations to the local adventurer’s guild in-game, plus several online forums and wikis anonymously. Shall we keep it going?”

“Yeah, that’s good. Keep it up. That reminds me, what happened to the berserkers?”

“Over half have been killed by beta testers. 6 subjects had deteriorated into mental collapse from the fear of being hunted by humans.”

“Any of them stable, active, *and* evolved?”

“Yes. Their stabilities varied, but No. 01, No. 08, No. 13, and No. 17 have been actively entering combat, and also reached the third stage, the rank-up,” the secretary said. She looked at the screen showing the surviving subjects and continued, faint admiration in her words. “The first twenty-three truly lived up to expectations. Only five had dropped out, and it looked like they’d been making good use of their *inborn abilities*.”

The elves had left for a new land, and the boy had given me a new name as the guardian spirit of this forest.

But I was a demon, not a spirit. And I didn’t even *live* here!

[Shedy] [Race: White Ghast] [Low Demon (High-Rank)]

□ A low demon made of dust and gases. An intelligent spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 303/303] 3↑

[Total Combat Power: 333/333] 3↑

[Unique Skill: Reroll] [Racial Skill: Fear]

[Simple Identification] [Humanoid Form (Crude)]

Oh, whatever... I’d have to drop my real name sooner or later, anyway.

In hindsight, picking that fight *was* a pretty harebrained idea, but it turned out well in the end. I got so much stronger compared to the first day of the game.

I was quite sure I had reached the top of the food chain in this forest by now. Even killing black caterpillars only gave me a pittance of power. And not just that, they were *running* from me the moment they

sensed me, now. Considering all that, I supposed killing humans really was the most efficient way.

Or maybe the bugs were running away because of the new skill I got from the rank-up...

[Racial Skill: Fear]

□ A passive skill of the demon race. Terrifies the weak.

...wow, how the hell did that boy not run away from me?

Could I still disguise myself with the cloak? If someone with good presence-sensing skills was to see me, wouldn't they feel the fear?

Damn it, this was the most obnoxious skill ever. At first glance it might seem useful for combat, but it only worked with enemies so weak as to be inconsequential in the first place, and anything I wanted to hunt would just run away from me.

I supposed I really should leave, then.

But it'd be really awkward to pop up in front of the boy again after that tearful goodbye, so I traveled in the other direction. Those elves cleaned up everything belonging to the slavers I killed. All I had was the usual cloak and my miscellanies.

Floating for a while reaffirmed my realization that yes, I *had* to focus my mind on something, otherwise the discomfort would rear its head again. I had been forcing myself to believe that the discomfort and everything wrong I felt was just the brain's hallucinations, but reality's never as easy as you'd like.

But, well, I didn't need to crawl along on the ground anymore. Just drifting along didn't provoke the sense of disconnect too badly, and my mind didn't *melt* as much. This was pretty much the only good thing in choosing the Ghast.

At least, it was a lot more comfortable than moving with legs.

...could I ever return to a normal human life? I wanted to get in some practice for shapeshifting too, but those rabbit ears just did **not** go away.

Fine, let's leave [Humanoid Form] for later thinking.

Got a bit faster, too. I crossed forests and mountains at a power walker's pace, and three days later, the scenery finally changed.

The thick, gloomy, broad-leaved forest gradually gave way to a bright, open woodland of needle-leaf trees. Far away, a humongous mountain range dominated the horizon.

...so turned out I just got even further away from human civilization.

Well, whatever. I slightly increased my scouting range and found a few magical signals, somewhat stronger than the monsters and animals living in that elven forest. Might be perfect for me as I was now.

I started to move towards them. The signal was rather fast, but stopped midway, as if to feed on something. Then I saw it.

[Horned Wolf]

[Magic Points (MP): 58/70] [Hit Points (HP): 116/120]

[Total Combat Power: 112]

Stronger than a black caterpillar, so it must give decent experience, right? High magic plus the horn meant it should be a monster.

I estimated around 5 to 6 experience points for each wolf. Thankfully, there were a lot of them. I could cover the quality with quantity.

...how did I get so much experience from humans when they were so much weaker? Was this why monster attack people?

Let's think about that later. I snuck up behind the wolf, currently busy devouring a rabbit, and struck.

It howled in pain, struggling violently in my grasp, then chomped at me. Ouch! That hurt a bit more than non-magical attacks from humans.

[Shedy] [Race: White Ghast] [Low Demon (High-Rank)]

[Magic Points: 298/303]

[Total Combat Power: 328/333]

I was careless, relying on my physical resistance. Perhaps the claws and fangs of monsters were magical, like enchanted weapons.

The wolf kept on raging against its restraint and howling. Stop that already .

But well, as I was, the most it could do was just prickling me, so I kept with the absorption and desiccated it. The experience received was just as I predicted.

[Shedy] [Race: White Ghast] [Low Demon (High-Rank)]

[Magic Points: 302/308] 5↑

[Total Combat Power: 328/338] 5↑

I wanted that horn too, but I wasn't as corporeal as I used to be pre-evolution. I couldn't exactly do physical attacks, and thus, couldn't take the corpse apart.

Seemed like I'd gotten quite used to fighting and the gore, now. I'd managed to learn how to sidestep the constant mental

'pain', but I also felt more aggressive from time to time. Problematic.

Alright, anything else to kill? I re-expanded my detection range. A few magical signals were speeding towards me.

...wait, what?

A chorus of howls answered me.

Shit, that was a wolf pack! More than ten of them. The howling when I was fighting that wolf must've had summoned the pack!

This was bad. Their hits could only scratch me, but considering the number, I'd be dead of a thousand cuts. And I couldn't recover mid-fight like that time with the slavers – individual wolf kills gave me too little.

I ran, floating up high enough so their fangs wouldn't reach me. Discretion is the better part of valor. I wasn't going to die and get my magic cut in half again after all this work.

My best speed was just around a human runner's. The wolves were faster. *'But they should give up once they saw that they couldn't reach me'*, I thought, and that was when they started to run up a tree and follow me from the branches.

Oh that was just *unfair*. I could just about imagine them laughing at my thoughts. What sort of super-wolves were these?!

They weren't even scared of me. Was mob psychology bolstering their courage? Shit, what to do, what to do...

Then I heard another far-off howl, reverberating from the depths of the woods. I shivered.

Another wolf? The boss of this gang? But then, why did I feel like that howl came from two different voices? And *even the wolves feared it*. What was that...?

Some distance away from us, a tree cracked, falling to the side to reveal the beast.

It was an azure horned wolf with a flaming mane, twice as big as the others. But those *eyes*. They were steeped in dark hatred, cursing all of existence. Two pairs of eyes on *two heads*.

...what *are* you?

The two-headed horned wolf approached in an instant. And then – I couldn't believe my eyes – it began to rip into and tear apart the other wolves.

The wolf pack scattered in panic. I was watching the carnage from above, stunned, when the two-headed wolf pounced at me, despite me being five meters off the ground.

No, shit, wait, *owww!*

[Shedy] [Race: White Ghast] [Low Demon (High-Rank)]

[Magic Points: 270/308]

[Total Combat Power: 310/338]

Holy hell! It took off ten percent just by scratching me! Right, what about you...

[Two-headed Horned Wolf]

[Magic Points: 143/170] [Hit Points: 263/280]

[Total Combat Power: 466]

What was this power?! That was fifty percent more than mine!

Nope. No fighting this. The normal horned wolves were still yelping, tails tucked between their legs. I immediately dove into the pack, mingling, trying to get the two-headed to target one of them.

Terribly cruel, even if I say so myself, but it wasn't the time for that sort of thinking. Luckily it worked, and while the mad beast was ravaging the wolves, I took the chance to retreat as fast as I could.

I was out of the fight. I was pretty sure I didn't have any sort of smell for it to track me, but I couldn't take chances here. I kept flying, blindly, without a thought as to my destination. After a while, I thought I heard a howl of sadness, of resentment, coming from the distance.

...were you... an alpha tester?

I thought all the other testers were fine, considering how I had managed to endure... but maybe that wasn't true. Maybe they were suffering.

I looked up at the moon, my mood introspective. A mental sigh resounded in my mind.

I just want my spot of solace...

Chapter 13 FIRST FRIEND

One day had passed since the encounter with the probable alpha tester. Leaving the territory of the mad wolf seemed prudent, so I turned my back on the mountain range and walked.

Yes, I *walked*.

I'd been constantly using and practicing my [Humanoid Form (Crude)] since encountering the wolves. Reason? I just realized, perhaps all too late, that encountering strong monsters out of nowhere was a very real possibility when you live in the mountains, forests, basically anywhere without human presence. So I thought that if I made my living just barely near the border of a human country, I wouldn't be meeting any monster too terrible.

And I could start hunting humans, too, not just monsters... What, attacking travelers? No way. I'd just get adventurers and beta players after me. I was actually aiming for the bandits attacking those travelers.

...there *are* bandits, right?

So I wanted to look close enough to humans to fool them. It was why I was cutting up my own mind just for the practice.

...wait a minute, wasn't this exactly how camouflage predators evolved?

That insane wolf... if they really were an alpha tester like me, then there wasn't much I could do. I wasn't remotely mentally healthy enough to try to save someone stronger than me, without even knowing how.

That time with the elven village was different. I had an actual chance of victory back then, the solution was simple, I was sort of fired-up after meeting a little kid – they were all reasons, but perhaps the most important one was that in a way, I felt... *excited* at the prospect of attacking humans.

Crap, was I turning into a *deviant*?! My mind didn't seem to be heading down the insanity route, nor any other route too terrible, but I had a feeling the path it was currently on would lead to some *serious* trouble down the line.

Well, whatever.

So yeah, I'd been mentally processing the **[Humanoid Form]** skill while walking for a whole day and then some. My latest check showed a change.

[Shedy] [Race: White Ghast] [Low Demon (High-Rank)]

☐ A low demon made of dust and gases. An intelligent spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 325/325] 17↑

[Total Combat Power: 357/357] 19↑

[Unique Skill: Reroll] [Racial Skill: Fear]

[Simple Identification] [Humanoid Form (Amateur)]

Surprise! The [Humanoid Form] skill got better... that's *better*, right?

So I *think* that by ranking-up, the quantity and quality of my magic got better, which afforded me the foundations of [Humanoid Form]. 'Crude' became 'Amateur'. To use a cooking analogy, it'd be like I had finally graduated from making charcoals into making something barely edible.

I checked for hostiles nearby. With my privacy confirmed, I dropped the cloak and took a closer look at myself.

I looked better, I think. My skin wasn't melted wax anymore. Much smoother. No drifting or flowing either, even if behind the skin layer my gaseous body was still circulating.

My body composition finally got good enough so that I could handle it like sculpting clay now, but for some stupid reason, that pair of rabbit ears was *impossible* to mess with.

...why?

I tried to force the ears to shrink, and my eyes jumped out of their sockets. Then, while I was reeling from the sight, the eyes slowly returned to normal, and the ears popped out again.

... *why!?*

Being called 'a rabbit' due to the albinism was, to me, nothing but an insult, no more. At least, that's what I thought. I never expected it had actually gotten to me so much...

On the bright side, they weren't the pointy kind of rabbit ears. They were droopy – lop ears, in other words – which meant that the cloak should hide them just fine.

If I ever managed to fully humanize myself, I'd have to pose as a rabbit girl. And I didn't even know if that particular beastman race existed.

With the improvement in [Humanoid Form], I could make fingers now. Oh, I'd missed actually *picking* things up.

Wearing the cloak came a lot easier... hey, didn't it look kinda dirty?

Not surprising, I supposed. It had looked old even when worn by that

weird beta player. After the many times it was dropped on the ground from my practice, exposed to the rain and wind for over a week straight, and dragged on the dirt and rocks due to my lack of height when shapeshifted, now the undyed garment was no better than a rag.

I mean, I used to have one like it in real life, but this was a game. No need to keep it dirty. Actually, this was pretty amazing technology. The game was realistic enough to simulate the damage and dirt when you abuse it. I'd known this was cutting-edge technology, but the realism was still astonishing.

I focused all my attention on my hearing. Hmm, nothing here... I moved away, checking from time to time, until I finally found what I'd been looking for.

The splashing of a river.

Yes, I'd been planning on washing the cloak.

It was a rivulet of spring water, trickling through rocks and pebbles, just about 30 centimeters wide.

I made my bipedal body squat down near the stream, which took a surprising amount of effort. Remember when I described the similarities of moving myself to puppetry? Well, I wasn't sure if it's because my skill level went up or if I simply got used to it, but it felt like I had more strings to control, now.

'You couldn't do this kind of stuff in normal video games! I was just enjoying the true VR experience!' I thought, trying my best to convince myself that the scene of a demon doing laundry wasn't the stupidest thing in the world.

I sighed. I'd been sidestepping the stress and irritation by latching onto new thoughts as soon as they came. Apparently, that had the side effect of loosening my personality into something a lot more inane.

I kept on trying – and failing – to wash the stains off. After a while, I saw something in the corner of my vision (well, I had 360 degrees vision, so it wasn't like there were corners; more like the part of my vision that I didn't actively pay attention to) moved.

boing

...what was this? It looked like a translucent mass of light-green, about 20 centimeters. It was camouflaged pretty well with the amount

of green around me. When I saw it, it was bouncing around about 2 meters downstream from where I was, looking like it was trying to scoop some water.

...a ball of jelly? I *think* it was a slime, but not drippy and gooey like I used to be. This one looked far jigglier and bouncier.

Was this rivulet where the local docile monsters came to drink?

It didn't show any sign of fear, so perhaps it hadn't noticed me yet. Let's keep it that way.

I continued **boing** scrubbing **boing** the cloth... why was the (possible) slime bouncing? Why did it look like it was having fun?

Well, whatever. I had to admit, the cloak just didn't want to get clean. Maybe some detergent would've helped, but it's not like I could get any.

I held up the soaked cloak and checked my work. Fine. This was good enough. Too much scrubbing would just damage the fabric, and I cleaned off most of the dirt anyway. There were still a few tough black stains...

boing

The (possible) slime was bouncing right below the garment, drinking up the dripping droplets.

Since when?! And it wasn't afraid of me? Was it actually super powerful?

[Slime?]

[Magic Points: 5/5] [Hit Points: 5/5]

[Total Combat Power: 5]

That's... weak. Even weaker than I was when I started. Perhaps it wasn't even smart enough to know fear.

Other possibilities included... alpha testers? Nah, no way. I didn't want to entertain the pitiful idea that there was a human being inside of a monster so stupid as to be happy just from drinking laundry water.

So a real monster, then... such a weird one.

...wait a minute? Maybe it wasn't playing with the droplets. Maybe it liked the *grime* in the water?

I moved the soaked cloak closer to it. The (possible) slime hopped in excitement and latched onto the hem of the garment.

I see, so it's really the grime, then... hey, no! Stop that! Don't melt my cloth!

I hastily pulled the cloak up. It *boing*'ed in protest.

...at least, I thought it was protesting. All the bouncing looked the same to me.

I didn't mind it cleaning the dirt, but this was the only thing I had to wear. It wasn't allowed to eat it.

I patted the wet cloak a few times while shaking my head, and then I pointed to the dirty part and nodded once. Hopefully it understood my miming. It probably did, since it replied with a few more bounces.

...again, I was just guessing here. I didn't speak Bouncese.

Once more, I slowly lowered the cloak. This time the (probable) slime latched onto the correct part of the garment. It dissolved only the dirt, while leaving the fabric unharmed. Wow, that *is* amazing.

I signaled it to stop, pulling the cloak away. It did, jiggling and quivering, somehow looking like an obedient dog. I firmly nodded, then pushed the garment back. It merrily crawled all over the cloth, wiping out the black stains in mere seconds.

The cloak now looked just like new if you ignore the tears.

The ball hopped, in what I was assuming to be a moment of pride in its work. I petted it as praise- *oh wow this is totally jelly*. Super jiggly.

After some struggling, I got back into the half-dried cloak – did it absorb the water too? It saw me dressing, and again it bounced in excitement.

Well, my limbed form only had the height of a five-years old. The cloak was going to get filthy again soon, considering I was dragging it everywhere, but this wasn't a problem I could solve.

Right, clothes cleaned, plus a cute mascot to relax to. I was feeling good.

Let's get going. I wanted to bring it along too, but I didn't think a wild monster would be tamed so easily just by feeding it (if I counted 'dripping dirty water' as 'feeding'). And it was weak as heck. I'd be worried if it tagged along.

I waved goodbye to the jiggly ball and began another session of intense puppetry. It didn't take long for me to realize, from the corner of my eyes, that the bouncing ball was still following me.

I stopped, questions popping up in my mind. *You're a slime, you're supposed to be crawling...* no, wait, that wasn't what I should be thinking about. Why was it following me?

'Hey, I didn't have any more food for you, you hear me?'

It took the chance to approach my feet and start jiggling, waiting for me.

...god that's cute.

What was going on with this creature? This (probable) slime... okay, that's just too verbose of a name.

Alright. I was in a good mood – a rare happening these days – so you'll be Friend Number Two (Number One being the elven kid). Let's name you.

It's a slime, so... hmm... Slimer? Nah, that thing's *ugly*, and I didn't have a proton pack. It'll be my friend-slash-pet, so Fido... rejected. It wasn't even a dog. Oh, whatever, it's a blob, it's "Blobsy" from now on.

The very moment I made the decision in my thoughts, Blobsy suddenly started to wiggle and hopped in a circle around me, looking overjoyed.

What... ? Did something happen to it? I identified Blobsy once more.

[Blobsy] [Race: Jelly Slime] [Kin of Shedy, the Demon]

[Magic Points: 10/10] [Hit Points: 10/10]

[Total Combat Power: 10]

[Special Skill: Laundry]

...more lines in the description. And it was my **[Kin]** now.

At least I was sure it was no alpha tester, but *what?!*

Chapter 14 BANDITS AND TRADERS

I had a new comrade on my journey of pain. It's a jelly slime. Her name's Blobsy... wait, was it a *her* or a *him*? Pretty sure slimes didn't have that sort of distinction anyway, so I say she's female from now on.

Hey, Blobsy. Say hi.

boing!

[Blobsy] [Race: Jelly Slime] [Kin of Shedy, the Demon]

[Magic Points: 10/10] [Hit Points: 10/10]

[Total Combat Power: 10]

[Special Skill: Laundry]

She could handle a squirrel at most.

Her special skill was to disintegrate any stubborn stains she touched. A terribly *tiny* blob. I couldn't even imagine how she'd fight.

...what should I do? Apparently she's my kin now, but it seemed next to impossible for her to do anything besides being a cute mascot and washing clothes. Well, the cuteness already made her indispensable to me, though.

Like right now. While I was resting a bit to recover from the stress, Blobsy started to bounce after some grasshoppers, probably for food. Then she returned, giving up after catching nothing, and began munching on some wild grass.

Cuuuute...

I started walking again. She jerked in shock, then panic-bounced after me. Once she caught up, she circled around me in excitement, tired herself out, then desperately climbed me. Now she was blobbing out on my shoulder, resting.

Cuuuute...

I might not know what she was thinking, but she seemed to understand what I wanted. Plus somehow, I always had a sense for her

location.

And so I continued my journey to search for a human country, with the salve for my bruised soul sitting on my shoulder.

Once we left the horned wolves' territory, the forest turned out to be surprisingly peaceful. Nothing was jumping out at us every few steps. There were only squirrels, rabbits, deers, and other such animals.

No wonder Blobsy could survive.

But even in such a peaceful forest, there still existed that weakest of monsters: the red caterpillars. Surprisingly ubiquitous, these bugs. They weren't worth anything to me at this point, and even Blobsy could probably outrun them. It'd be troublesome if they picked a fight, though, so I took off my hood and scared them off with my natural face.

My head was just a blank oval. If I didn't have the rabbit ears, it's be just an egg.

Two days since Blobsy came with me, my **[Humanoid Form (Amateur)]** skill leveled up again.

[Shedy] **[Race: White Ghast]** **[Low Demon (High-Rank)]**

☐A low demon made of dust and gases. An intelligent spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 330/330] 5↑

[Total Combat Power: 363/363] 6↑

[Unique Skill: Reroll] **[Racial Skill: Fear]**

[Simple Identification] **[Humanoid Form (Apprentice)]**

The amateur was an apprentice, now.

I knew it. Once I acquired the foundation for shapeshifting, it's a lot easier to improve the skill.

The dishwasher had graduated into the potato-peeler. My food's good enough for me to eat, but not enough to serve any customers.

I didn't need to build my sandcastle barehanded anymore – the rise in skill rank gave me a 'trowel', so to speak. My hands, once mittens, could do rock-paper-scissors now.

I hadn't been idle with my hunting, either. There weren't any strong monsters, but I did get attacked by a bear. Not a huge one, just around 120 centimeters. It had some weird white markings around its neck.

It had around 150 combat power, but in the end, it was just a normal animal. Pitiful, both in terms of the damage it could deal to me – which was none – and the experience I got from drinking it dry.

Out of everything, it was Blobsy processing the bear that was most surprising.

She squished herself, spreading out on the carcass. I left her alone for a while, thinking she was just nibbling. 30 minutes later, the whole bear was gone.

Wait a minute... why was she *still* tiny? Where did all the meat go? She still looked like a 20 centimeters ball of jelly.

I identified her again, but nothing had changed. I suppose it wouldn't, considering that I was the one who killed it. She only ate the corpse. If you could raise your level just by eating, then all the people of royal and noble families would get *crazily* muscular the older they get.

I walked, inane musings in my mind, and stepped past the forest border before I knew it.

Trees were still there, but sparse. Most of the land was grass. I scouted the area for human presence, thinking I might have finally gotten close to civilization. No signals I found resembled them.

There were a few herbivores dotting the grasslands. They looked like plesiosaurs. Seemed quite docile, and they had slightly higher combat power than me anyway, so I elected to stay away.

I kept along the boundary between the forest and and grassland. It didn't take long for me to find a well-trodden road.

Finally! About 5 meters wide, so it was probably a highway between towns.

Humans recognizing me would be bad, so I put up my hood and

detoured away from the road, wading into tall grass and copses of trees. Then I heard sounds of fighting from somewhere far off. I put Blobsy on my head and hurried.

A while after, I saw two horse carriages being attacked by a small group of people. A perfectly clichéd scene.

Horses? So this world had trains, but not cars? A closer look revealed a group of spear-wielding men surrounding the carriages, wearing crude armor, numbering ten-odd, and looking much like the typical bandits. The defenders were dog and cat-eared beastpeople wearing ratty clothes.

“Don’t let those damn bandits get any closer!” A chubby human shouted from the back of the carriage. Three beastpeople readied their handaxes, faces close to tears, their necks bound by the same kind of choker that I once saw in the hand of the magician who attacked the elves.

I supposed that proved my slave-choker hypothesis, then. And that was some seriously impossible orders. Three slaves with handaxes and knives, wearing nothing but rags, couldn’t possibly hope to win against ten-plus decently equipped bandits.

As I got closer to the scene, Blobsy hid inside the cloak’s pocket. She seemed scared.

“With just those few chumps?!” A huge bandit, probably their boss, laughed uproariously. “Leave a carriage for us, and we’ll spare your life! Come on, you lot, deal with them!”

He gave the order to his smirking underlings, yet the men didn’t move. Instead, four well-armed beastman slaves came forward, their neck bound by the same kind of chokers.

...both sides were fighting with slaves? Just giving orders?

Once the bandits’ slaves found out they were about to fight their own people, their faces stiffened in anguish, and they feverishly shook their heads.

...was this another game event? I only ever saw demihuman slaves. If this wasn’t an event, then what the hell was this world’s ‘*humanity*’?

I was dumbfounded, my eyes glued to the scene. Apparently the chokers could compel the slaves – they began fighting with tears in their eyes.

“D-Damn animals, protect the goods! If you lose, I’ll send your kids to the mines!”

“Come on, fight harder! What, do you not care for your *precious* friends and family?”

Both the carriage owner and the bandit leader didn’t spare a second thought before using intimidation as their first choice of motivation.

I didn’t even have the chance to interfere before all the trader’s slaves were stabbed to death. None of the bandits’ died, and only one had a rather serious wound on his arm. The battle was over in a blink of an eye.

“Damn useless vermins! Waste of money!” The trader swore obscenities at his dead slaves while kicking their corpses.

The bandit leader looked satisfied. He ordered his men to appropriate one of the carriages.

“Bwahaha! Alright, I’ll take that one. Better get some better slaves next time, merchant, or hire adventurers...” He glanced over the wounded slave and nonchalantly muttered, “Oh, right, you. Can’t use you now, can I?”

He stabbed a spear right through the bleeding slave.

“Hey, merchant! Compensate for that one too!”

The trader reluctantly acquiesced, his mouth twitching. He handed over several gold coins.

...an unspoken agreement, perhaps, between the merchants and the bandits. To turn banditry into a proxy battle, with slaves the only one getting hurt.

The group of bandits leisurely walked off with one carriage. The

merchant, unharmed, kept on cursing his slaves for quite a while. His driver had had to calm him down, and they left the area with their single carriage. The four dead slaves were thrown to the roadside and ignored.

...was this *really* a game event?

My original plan was to aim for the bandits preying on travelers. But now, I couldn't pick a side. I didn't want to pick a side.

The merchants were pissing me off more, but if I let the bandits go, there was no guarantee I could find them again. At least I remembered all their faces.

'Hey, Blobsy. Which side should I go for?'

She crawled out of my pocket and bounced in the directions of the bandits.

I see. The more the merrier, right?

'Hey, can you track the bandits without letting them know?'

She bounced her reply.

I watched Blobsy hop off after the bandits.

...my request was just a spur-of-the-moment thing. Would she be fine? Too late for takebacks now, anyway. I floated off after the merchant's carriage.

I didn't think I could lose track of them, considering we were all on the same road, but I had to wonder how fast a human running – my top speed – could be comparing to a horse carriage. With the existence of railway technology, I feared carriages might have gotten some measure of improvements, too.

If they could manage to get inside a village – it didn't even need to be a town – before I caught up, I'd lose. The strange barrier would hold me off. There was likely no way for me to get in.

I wasn't so delusional as to believe that I was doing this for justice, that this was fitting judgement for the kind of person who treated their slaves' lives as a game and then vented his anger on the deceased after he lost.

I just wanted to avenge them. To at least lessen their regrets.

Luck was with me. A few minutes later, I found the carriage parked by the wayside. The irritated merchant and his driver was checking their losses.

“Come on, boss, it’s good enough we got out of it safe and sound. It’s just some food and slaves we bought from the village, isn’t it?”

“*And* the horse and carriage! Those weren’t *just* slaves, fool, they’re expensive ones! Damn demihumans got a lot sneakier these days, you can’t legally buy any new ones on the official markets! Scamming bastard fucking lied to me.

They weren’t ‘combat-capable’, they were wastes of air, that’s what!”

I was... pretty sure the merchant was an exception, not the rule to this world’s humanity... right?

The inspection seemed to be over. The merchant urged the driver to hurry, and the two set off. The trader was sitting next to his driver, instead of his usual spot inside the carriage.

“Boss, you should get back in. It’s dangerous here.”

“Shut your trap. It’s your fault you didn’t notice the bandits early enough. I can’t trust your eyes.”

The driver didn’t bother hiding his distaste at the insult.

Right. How do I want to do this?

Originally, my plan of only aiming for the outlaws was to avoid having soldiers and beta testers sent after me. In that case... would an accident work?

I took off the cloak, released my humanoid form, dispersed just enough to blend into the scenery, then moved in front of the wagon.

The two still hadn’t noticed anything wrong. But the horse did sense my attention, and fear began to permeate into its steps. The wagon started to swerve left and right.

“H-Hey, what’s wrong? Calm down!” The driver was nearly panicking.

“Do something already!” The merchant screamed, desperately holding onto his seat.

Walking and playing with Blobsy weren’t the only things I did these last few days. I’d been experimenting with **[Reroll]** too, and I now had confirmation of the skill’s success rate when used on others.

It had a high possibility of failing if the target was focused. Which also meant that if they were surprised or agitated, it’d work most of the time.

That first time with the beta tester, I could chalk it up to chance. The second time I succeeded against the slave hunters, even I started to think it was too convenient.

And after a few tests, I’d determined that my chances would go up if the target saw me. My supposition was that using the skill was easier on targets under the effect of the **[Fear]** demon racial skill.

Well, those tests were with weak monsters, though. This would be the first time I tried it on humans.

[Reroll]

Despite the horse’s fear and the swerving, the carriage was still somehow avoiding the rocks littering the road, but the horse didn’t notice the *Identification Crystal* I dropped. The wagon lurched.

The nearly obese trader lost his balance. He scrambled, trying to grab onto the edge of his seat. I used the skill while throwing my presence at him.

[Reroll]

Terror flashed on his face for a moment, and his hand grasped only air. He fell gracelessly on his head.

“Boss!?” The driver noticed, but too late. The moment his scream rang out, the merchant’s neck was already broken.

[Shedy] [Race: White Ghast] [Low Demon (High-Rank)]

[Magic Points: 256/335] 5↑

[Total Combat Power: 289/368] 5↑

My, that was a very *unlucky* fall. Also, apparently the more difficult the check, the lower the consumed magic cost.

And it turned out I still receive experience from an *accidental death*... I was a bit too far away, though. I got his lifeforce, but couldn't recover any magic. I'd have to write the crystal off as a loss, too. Well, it only had three uses left anyway.

I felt Blobsy stop moving. She must have found the bandits' lair. I hurried to her, the merchant and his driver no longer in my thoughts.

My mind was whirring with thoughts even as I flew.

That scene back then, when I used **[Reroll]** ... I'd seen something like it before.

Ever since I was a little kid, the people who bullied me, with deeds or with words, had always met with constant misfortune. *Mysteriously*.

One had a broken arm just from tripping. One slipped on the stairs. One cut her fingers multiple times with the kitchen knife. Were those all my fault?

Strangely, **[Reroll]** always felt like the most natural thing in the world to me, even from the very first time I used it. Was it because I had always had it, ever since I was born?

When I arrived, it was already dark. Blobsy bounced out of the field of tall grass and cuddled up to me. Cuuuute...

Oh, whoops, I forgot the cloak...ah well. I commanded her to lie down – since she no longer has the safehouse that was my cloak's pocket – and she splatted into a disc, completely hiding herself inside the grass... whoa. She's a very skillful blob.

I didn't need her to show me where they were. Some distance away was a hole leading into what looked like an exploratory mine. A man wearing grungy clothes was on watch, looking bored.

I was going to attack their base. That thought sent shivers through me.

Not the kind of shivers associated with that Disconnect with reality. If anything, it felt like *excitement*. As if I only just came to myself, my true self, in that moment. I moved, my body feeling more natural than

ever.

I approached as mist. For a moment, the watchman frowned at seeing a white mist under the moonlit, cloudless night. His expression quickly turned to **[Fear]** at the sight of me.

He was about to scream. I immediately rushed into his mouth before he could, then apply a bit of **[Humanoid Form]** to fill up his lungs and stifle his voice.

...it actually worked. I thought it might, yet I still surprised myself.

He went blue in scant seconds, his face set in a rictus. Once his lifeforce was drained, I wafted through the cracks in the worn-out, rickety-looking door.

I saw light leaking out from my side just after entering the abandoned mine. I peeked through the hole and saw two men, looking like the quintessential bandits, gambling over a card game. Probably the other lookout personnel waiting for their shift.

[Bandit x2]

[Magic Points: 20/20] [Hit Points: 60/60]

[Total Combat Power: 48]

Weeksauce. But, well, if they had the strength of mind to train themselves, they wouldn't be serving as bandit underlings like this.

The only light source I could see was a single candle-looking thing. I shot out two copper coins I'd been storing inside me.

[Reroll] [Reroll]

One coin missed even with the skill, but the other hit. It snuffed out only the fire, leaving the candle perfectly intact.

"Huh, what happened to the light?"

"Did you drop a coin? I heard something like it."

The men were startled, but not alarmed. They started to fumble around in the dark for matches. I snuck up to them and choke them out the same way. Their lifeforce was taken without trouble.

This was so much easier than doing combat absorption. Well, the idea might seem ingenious – even I almost thought so, at first – but in hindsight, if I could invade their mouths like this, I might as well stab them in the neck. Simpler that way.

[Shedy] [Race: White Ghast] [Low Demon (High-Rank)]

[Magic Points: 245/353] 18↑

[Total Combat Power: 280/388] 20↑

A quick magical ping revealed around twenty other signals inside the mine. Some of them must be the slaves. I wonder how many were bandits? Around six of the signals were immobile, so I headed there first.

In the darkness, I saw a large wooden cage. The bars were logs, around as big as a human adult arm. Inside were beastman slaves, lifelessly sitting on the ground. Two of them were kids.

I felt my heart harden upon seeing the bruise marks on those two.

I couldn't release them right this moment. They still had their chokers. I couldn't be sure what they'd do.

The other ten signals, most likely the bandits, were all in one room. I was considering how to take them down when two of them started to move this way.

I rose to the ceiling. The two of them, red-faced and stinking of alcohol, entered a side path and headed towards a barred, dilapidated-looking room. Seemed like a storeroom this time, not a prison. They opened the padlock and brought out a wooden crate, full of bottles of some kind of alcohol.

They were about as strong as the underlings before, so I ambushed them from behind. And just like before, I choked them before they could scream. They started to thrash around upon realizing they were being attacked. Their faces gradually turned blue from the lack of oxygen.

The crate of bottles met the hard ground. Surprisingly loud.

I hurried to absorb their lifeforce as fast as I could. Another bandit showed up, probably due to the noise.

“You two, what were you...”

The middle-aged bandit looked at the two with exasperation, perhaps thinking they were only up to some drunken hijinks.

Then he saw their discolored faces, and he shouted.

“Enemy atta-agh!”

I rushed forward to mute him, but too late. A group of bandits arrived, and the first thing they saw was a white mist desiccating their comrade.

“It’s a monster!”

One versus seven. Balance would be subjected to further changes depending on who had how much magic and enchanted weapons.

“Damn, a wraith! Rabid thing!”

The bandit leader unsheathed a fancy-looking dagger that was hanging from his waist. The blade shone with a faint magical light.

[Bandit Leader]

[Magic Points: 40/40] [Hit Points: 90/90]

[Total Combat Power: 116]

[Middle-Aged Bandit x3]

[Magic Points: 30/30] [Hit Points: 75/75]

[Total Combat Power: 65]

[Underling Bandit x3]

[Magic Points: 20/20] [Hit Points: 60/60]

[Total Combat Power: 50]

The only ones with enchanted weapons were the leader and the three middle-aged men wielding daggers as old as they were.

My honest opinion? Those slave hunters were way more powerful. Just the lack of a magician already cut down a lot of danger for me. And now I was even stronger than back then.

I immediately charged towards the three underlings and envelop them. But they weren't to be killed, not just yet.

“Waaagh!” “It’s on my head! Help!”

“Stay still, you fuckers!”

One of the middle-aged bandit swung his dagger. I maneuver to hide behind an underling, and the blade bit deep into his shoulder. He screamed.

“Fuck!”

“It’s just a wraith! Stop pussyng around and *kill it!*”

Another middle-aged bandit charged in and slashed. I didn’t try to dodge this time, instead pouring myself into his mouth and suck dry his lifeforce from the inside.

“Poison?!” The leader exclaimed.

Nope. He just drew the wrong conclusion from seeing the man’s rapidly paling face. I rushed towards my next target, the leader, and he lost his calm. He started to swing his dagger with wild abandon.

“S-Stay away! You lot, do something already!”

A few of his swings hit. I endured, holding on and draining his life bit by bit. One of the old bandits seemed to have run out of patience – he charged with a powerful thrust.

[Reroll] **[Reroll]**

“Wha...”

“Aaargh! Damn you...”

I failed at making the stab miss me, but it *also* cut deeply into the leader’s stomach. He held his wound and dropped to his knees.

I see. Even if the **[Fear]** was affecting them, forcibly failing a focused attack was still difficult.

But, well, the most dangerous threat had been disabled. I gently rose into the air. Their faces contorted in terror.

Right. Time to clean house.

A key clattered inside the cage. The beastman prisoners exclaimed in surprise, swiveling their eyes between me – wearing a baggy robe I ‘borrowed’ from the storeroom – and the key in incomprehension.

Some distance away, I gestured for them to come to me. A man, perhaps the leader of this group of beastmen, seemed to have realized it was the key to the cage. Yet his suspicions hadn’t abated.

“...who are you? What’s a kid doing here?”

I shook my head, then beckoned them one more time.

He came to a conclusion some moments later and nodded to his comrades. They unlocked the cage door and got out.

I repeated the gesture. They were tense, but still nodded and followed me. On the way, they saw the dried-out bandits.

Some of the women and children gasped and squeaked.

And we arrived.

“It’s him...!”

The bandit leader was lying in a pool of his own blood, a hole in his stomach. Still alive, if barely. Surprise and hatred colored the prisoners’ gazes.

I pointed towards the weapons gathered in a corner of the room. The beastmen smiled savagely. The dying man’s face warped in despair.

“We give our thanks.”

Once they had achieved their vengeance, I showed them the way to the storeroom full of clothing and food. They bowed deeply, then headed off on their own journey.

Apparently this group was a tribe that used to live in the northern forest and grasslands. Human slave hunters found them a few months earlier, and almost the whole tribe was caught. They said most of the humans living in cities only ever saw beastmen as slaves, captured for free labor.

...what the hell was this world's humanity?

Couldn't get more information from them, though, considering my muteness. And I didn't want to stay in contact for too long, lest my true nature got revealed.

Well, I didn't quite mind. I'd know, sooner or later.

That aside, I think I could use this mine as a hidden base for a while. The beastmen didn't actually take that much from the storeroom, saying it was supposed to be mine since I was the one who dealt with the bandits, so I think I'd be spending some time auditing.

There were a lot of corpses... but not anymore. Blobsy had a feast. I thought she liked doing laundry, but maybe she was actually aiming for the blood splatter...?

Also, I gained another curious skill out of nowhere.

[Shedy] [Race: White Ghast] [Low Demon (High-Rank)]

□A low demon made of dust and gases. An intelligent spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 216/392] 39↑

[Total Combat Power: 255/431] 43↑

[Unique Skill: Reroll] [Racial Skill: Fear]

[Simple Identification] [Humanoid Form (Apprentice)] [Skilled Packer]

What is it now...?

< <**The Guidedog**> >

Hello, everyone. Thank you for continuing to support *World of Yggdrasia*. We have wonderful news for all the beta testers who've been with us all the way until now.

A new event is coming: <**Subdue the Berserkers**>

During the event, fast travelling between Temples within a single country will be free. Locations of the berserk monsters will be updated every 10 minutes. And finally, there will be a special item reward for the entire party for successful subjugations!

Let us all fight for the prizes!

Chapter 16 BERSERKER EVENT

Before I knew it, I had another weird skill.

[Shedy] **[Race: White Ghast]** **[Low Demon (High-Rank)]**

□ A low demon made of dust and gases. An intelligent spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 216/392] 39↑

[Total Combat Power: 255/431] 43↑

[Unique Skill: Reroll] **[Racial Skill: Fear]**

[Simple Identification] **[Humanoid Form (Apprentice)]** **[Skilled Packer]**

‘Skilled Packer’...? I *did* pick up the silver and copper coins I found in the bandit’s lair just in case. To think that resulted in a skill... wait a minute? I had around 30 of the coins. That should be quite a bit of metal. But looking at myself from the outside, I couldn’t see them anywhere. Where was I keeping my money?

I mean, I knew I had them. If I dispersed myself into looser gas, I could see them laced here and there throughout my body.

But once I raised the density back up, they disappeared... how curious!

So anyway, I checked out the storeroom and grabbed whatever seemed useful. These included a spare robe and cloak, the bandit leader’s magic dagger, some expensive-looking rings and necklaces, some bottles of what looked like medicine, some jerky as Blobsy’s snacks, and more.

boing

Eh? You want some right now? But didn’t you just eat more than ten corpses?

She looked sort of bummed out and started to clean up the blood on the ground, so I relented and gave her a slice of jerky.

After some experimentation, it turned out I could store anything that fitted a single suitcase, in both dimensions and volume. Which meant that a dagger could fit, but not spears. Also, anything too weighty would make me feel sluggish, so I limited my heavy stuff to coins and potions.

Alright, this would be our base to hunt monsters and bandits. Let's go.

boing

I left with Blobsy, completely unaware of the disaster looming upon us. Upon all secret alpha testers.

"There it is! 300 meters ahead!"

"Alright, that Berserker is ours!"

"Yeah!" "Awesome!" "Let's go!"

Within the northern reaches of the central continent lay the Principality of Trendeux. A country formed around the 32nd World Sapling to be found.

The Sapling had blessed the lands with its boon. Despite the latitude, the climate still stayed relatively gentle. But the moment you entered the mountains, the greenery instantly gave way to white, the field of snow stretching unbroken all the way to the summit. A spectacle of utmost grandeur.

A silver-colored troll was there, its fur blending into the snowy mountain. It was busy with its meal, a gray bear.

At first glance, the subspecies looked close to a yeti. It was over three meters tall and about two meters wide, with arms as big as tree trunks.

The troll looked at the bear it was eating and suddenly went quiet. Then, just as abruptly, it began to tear apart the carcass.

It starting pounding on a nearby boulder, crushing its own arms

without a care, and roared in agony.

Such madness unnerved the beta players, being so *real* they even forgot they were in a game for a moment. Their faces paled. Some gasped for a breath.

To the south of the Principality of Trendeux was a large country, the Trestan Kingdom, which was the chosen base for these players. They were Rank 3, or in other words, players who had reached level 3 in their combat skill. Native adventurers in *World of Yggdrasia* used the same ranking system.

There was a rather popular thread on the game's VR boards, in which two parties of Rank 2 players from Trendeux reported their defeats at the hand of this berserk monster. And so, this group of players had come here after a few train rides overnight to challenge the troll.

"Total combat power is 499. No wonder. That's quite tough for Rank 2."

"Hey everyone, gather up! I'm casting defensive buffs!"

"Alright, let's go. Remember to pull the boss with arrows."

"Can I use poisons?"

"Did somebody say 'poison'? Here, try this neurotoxin I made. It's going to stick around for a *long* time."

"Holy shit woman, that's *vicious*."

The poisoned arrow found its target. Overwhelming pain drove the berserk troll into a rampage.

In a one-on-one fight, the troll would almost certainly win. So the group of five leveraged their teamwork. Magic corralled the monster while blades sliced into flesh. Almost thirty minutes later, the leader, a swordsman wielding a greatsword, decapitated it.

"Hell yes!"

"Man, regeneration *and* high power. That's a boss alright."

"And still no match for us! What's the reward?"

“Eh? Did the corpse just disappear?”

“Maybe because it’s an event monster? Hey, it dropped something. A yellow gem?”

“Is that the reward? Can’t be, right?”

“Oh hey, there’s the system message.”

“Whoahoh?! A year pass for the airship!”

Equivalent to 10 large gold coins, this yearly pass allowed you free rides on the airship, with which you can reach any country in Yggdrasia in just half a day. All members of the party received one. Once this info was posted on the forum, the race began. The race to hunt for the **twenty** remaining berserk monsters scattered all over the world.

“Secret alpha tester No.17. Confirmed mental collapse and subsequent cessation of neural activity. As per procedure, requesting dispatch of disposal team.”

“Oh boy. No. 17 was pretty stable, considering. Now even that one’s gone.”

“Will it be a problem, sir? No. 17 was a rather special one. This event has been resulting in quite a few permanent losses in subjects.”

Brian, in the monitoring center of the 7th facility, was in high spirits. His secretary voiced her concern, and he flippantly replied with a shrug.

“Analysis of their powers and genome’s already done. The government has been pressuring our bosses for faster results, too. The six months deadline’s still a long way away, but with how enthusiastic our testers have been, we’re already done with the basic data gathering. The event is just to finish up early.”

The 100 secret alpha testers weren’t just random orphans.

The existence of ESP – strange and mysterious special powers – was confirmed all over the world, and these testers were believed to be people possessing such powers. Over half of them only had trivial powers, such as vague precognition or slightly higher physical abilities than the norm, but the first 23 chosen were a step above in power. Or in the case of a few among them, several steps. The powers of those few had helped bring about revolutionary technologies for mankind, many with applications in warfare. It was the beginning of a new era.

Power and genetic analysis had already finished. The experiment was only continuing to see if the special abilities could be improved, or if new applications could be discovered, by putting the orphans into extreme stress conditions. That, and also to *dispose* of the testers, since they were no longer useful.

The number of deaths and mental collapses climbed rapidly due to the event, even though only one month had passed since the experiment started. Already, there were 32 deaths from cessation of neural activities, with another 48 logged out from mental collapses.

Only 20 alpha testers left.

“And just as expected, No. 01 and No. 08 are still hanging on. Man, aren’t they stubborn... oh, right. Wasn’t there another one quite stable?”

“Yes, sir, that would be No. 13. Considering how all the other spiritual-avatar testers had suffered mental collapses in just the first stage, she has an amazingly durable mind.”

“Yeah, that’s the one. The ‘Demon Child’. Not a very nice power though, that one.”

The albino girl who caused misfortune to everyone around her. Called a ‘demon’ by her own parents. Abused and neglected.

“A pity her power wasn’t actually probability manipulation like we wanted. According to the 3rd research facility’s report, ‘the power could only nudge the results. Implementations of it technically worked, but the results varied so much it just isn’t practical, plus maintaining control over it would literally take the mind of a demon’,” the secretary said.

Brian laughed. “So even our little demon’s a lost cause. I suppose it’s impossible, then. Well, might as well have our alpha testers keep with the mana gathering until the end.”

Hold up-whoa-hold up a minute, what in the world was going on here?!

“There it is! The white one!”

“Don’t let it get away! This one’s gotta be ours!”

Just a few days after I took over the bandit lair, some beta testers came out of nowhere to attack my base.

They were about as powerful as the ones chasing me before, so I still managed to repel them. Then a different party came by the next day. In the end, after finally gaining a base, I was forced to abandon it.

I had planned on hiding out in the forest depths until the heat died down, yet *every single one of them* found me with ease.

I tried to hide with my **[Humanoid Form]** several times, but a single kid wandering around in the forest proved to be too suspicious. Plus, I had to change back into gas form if I wanted to move quickly, which only helped them discover me faster and give chase.

And I couldn’t even choke them, since they were playe-ouch!

“What’s with this one? Poison didn’t work!”

“My turn! **[Thunder Bolt]**!”

That *hurt*, dammit! What if you hit Blobsy?! She’s in my pocket!

[Magic Swordsman-ish Young Man] **[Race: Human**

] [Adventurer]

[Magic Points (MP): 45/82] [Hit Points (HP): 88/90]

[Total Combat Power: 150]

[Archer-ish Young Man [Race: Human

] [Adventurer]

[Magic Points (MP): 52/60] [Hit Points (HP): 110/110]

[Total Combat Power: 187]

Unforgivable. They seemed to prefer projectiles, so I mingled in the trees and hid my cloak on the canopy of one. The magic swordsman gave chase without much care. I ambushed him from above.

“Aaaah!? What the fuck?!”

“Calm down! Use your magic!”

Too late. My combat power was thrice theirs, so absorption worked quickly.

“Shit, my HP and MP’s going down!”

“W-Wait, stay there, don’t move!”

They were afraid. Afraid of **me**.

The archer tensed. He took out an expensive-looking silver-colored arrow from his bag and aimed. Just before the arrow was loosed, he suddenly seemed distracted by something.

[Reroll]

“Aaagk...”

“What?!”

The arrow pierced through the magic swordsman’s knee... even without needing my skill.

Oh, I see. Blobsy was waving the cloak on top of the tree.

I sort of pitied the magic swordsman a bit, so I decided to leave him for last. Meanwhile, I dealt with the archer while he was still stunned. The battle ended without much fanfare.

I sighed in relief. Perhaps just **[Fear]** ing me was enough to lower my opponent's success rate?

[Shedy] [Race: White Ghast] [Low Demon (High-Rank)]

☐A low demon made of dust and gases. An intelligent spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 355/477] 85↑

[Total Combat Power: 255/499] 68↑

[Unique Skill: Reroll] [Racial Skill: Fear]

[Simple Identification] [Humanoid Form (Normal)] [Skilled Packer]

I defeated 6 beta players in nearly as many days. A bit more power for me.

I had a feeling I could evolve after breaking 500 magic. Strangely enough, the increase in my combat power wasn't as good as my magic.

Also, after using humanoid form 24/7 to disguise myself, the skill leveled up again. To continue my cooking analogy, at (Normal), I was a cook in an eatery in the countryside. You know the type. The only place to eat in town, had tons of choices on the menu, yet all the dishes were about the same: not bad, but nothing to write home about either.

With how quickly the skill was improving, I had to wonder, how many levels did it have left? I didn't look much different. Mostly, it was just my surface looking more like a doll's, plus my body getting thicker.

Whoops, I forgot. We should move. Staying still might invite another attack. Let's go, Blobsy.

boing

I was about as fast as a person running, so if I kept circling around the wilderness, the beta players shouldn't be able to catch up that easily.

Right, how was I getting detected so quickly? The carriage driver I left alive might have seen me, but he shouldn't be able to pinpoint where I was going to.

Was there a spell to detect my location? Such a pain... If that was a spell, outrunning its range might do me some good.

It looked like going this way would return me to that mountain range again.

I continued forward to the mountains. A while later, I detected magic signals that felt similar to the horned wolves'. We were actually in sight range of each other. They didn't attack me, though, since I was stronger than before.

I felt like there were less of them than there used to be.

I expanded my detection range, just in case, and moved forward. Then I found several signals, probably beta testers, and a large signal near them. They were deep in the mountains.

Normally I would have left there and then, but if the large signal was a secret alpha tester, then cooperation might be on the table. Holding onto faint hope, I peeked at them from afar.

I saw the mad two-headed horned wolf.

[Two-Headed Horned Wolf]

[Magic Points: 315/340] [Hit Points: 372/415]

[Total Combat Power: 499]

Chapter 17 SECRET ALPHA TESTER NO. 01

Some distance away, in a wide-open area littered with boulders and rocks, ten adventurers who seemed to be beta players were locked in mortal combat with the two-headed horned wolf.

[Two-Headed Horned Wolf]

[Magic Points: 315/340] [Hit Points: 372/415]

[Total Combat Power: 499]

The beta players were all at around 200 combat power. The party was

composed of more than just warriors. At least, I also saw a magician, plus someone holding a greatshield.

A nimble woman wielding a shortsword was holding the wolf's attention. When it tried to approach her, a shield-holder immediately intervened and held it at bay. Any damage the shielder took was healed by a magician. Once the wolf stopped moving, the warriors swiftly attacked with axes and spears.

Was this what good cooperation looked like? The beta players were moving so well. Even though the horned wolf was stronger than any single one of the players, I couldn't imagine it winning at all.

But the wolf continued to toss around the warriors, all the while just barely avoiding being wounded too severely. The two heads were acting on their own. Completely unpredictable. The party's assault had stalled.

The left head was rampaging in beastly frenzy, while the right head calmly watched and dissected the beta players'

movements, managing their attacks.

The wolf wasn't exactly the mad beast that I met that first time... I didn't know what happened then. Perhaps it-they really was an alpha tester like me.

If this continued, I was quite sure they'd lose. But what if... what if I joined in? The wolf was still putting up a good fight.

Maybe I could tip the scale?

Worst case scenario, I'd get killed alongside them... Oh, whatever, who cares. Death would just cut my magic in half anyway. I could handle being weakened for a while.

Alright, charge! But Blobsy's fragile, so *'lie low over there, okay?'*

"Wha-Something's coming!"

The first one to realize was the bow-wielding woman. As my density in humanoid form rose whenever I gained more power, in gas form, I now covered an area of several square meters.

“Somebody check for new info!”

“Shit, who’d have time for it right now...”

“I got it! It’s the white mist monster! Not a new one, some people’ve seen it before. According to the newest location update, it’s getting here really quickly!”

“Combat power... 499! An event monster, gotta be!”

Event? Was there an event going on? And the corporation was even exposing our locations for the beta players to hunt us?

“It’s intangible! We need one magician and one archer to aggro it!”

“Got it! We’ll buy some time, so deal with the wolf quickly!”

“Alright, freak, come over here!”

The archer was firing at me, all the while moving away from the main fight.

I wasn’t just making myself a bigger target with this form. As long as they could see me, they would **[Fear]** me, even if the effect wasn’t exactly significant. And while my defense did drop when spread out like this, damage received from piercing attacks was reduced, too.

The fight would be a lot simpler if I could kill the two trying to drag me away, but they’d probably just run around to waste my time once I made my intention clear. Plus, magicians were my natural enemies.

So obviously, I hit them right where they didn’t want me to.

I pretended to chase after the two. At the same time, I stretched out a part of myself from the edge of my gaseous form, aiming for a white-robed girl who was busy healing the shield-holder. My tendril of gas slithered forward and struck.

“Aaaghh!!!”

“Shit, it attacked us? Support!”

“You two, come back!”

The reckless shapeshifting played hell with my vision. It's been a long time since I felt dizzy again, but I couldn't afford to be distracted here.

I couldn't stay and leisurely absorb the healer here. The whole party would just gang up on me. So I circled around to her back, turned to humanoid form, grabbed her neck and used my dagger, formerly belonging to the bandit leader, to slice it open.

All players, all humans, would take heavy damage if you hit them in the right spot. No matter how much hit points they had, this fact wouldn't change.

The white-robed girl collapsed in a daze. The beta players were flabbergasted, and their shock quickly turned into an uproar. But the one most surprised was me – from the corner of my vision, I saw the calmer head of the wolf looked at me. And their eyes *widened*.

The girl lying on the ground turned into light particles and disappeared. The beta testers started to panic.

“What the fuck is this thing?! It just turned human!!”

“Calm down, guys, we can handle this! Anyone who can do healing magic, help the tank!”

“Gotta deal with this white one first-”

“Shit, the Cerberus-aaaagh!!!”

The two-headed wolf... the Cerberus, apparently? They sent the tank flying and pinned him down.

The tank covered himself with his shield, trying to ward off the fangs. The warriors attacked the Cerberus all at once to rescue him.

“Let go of him!”

“Quick, heal, heal!”

The moment the beta players were distracted by the wolf, I returned to gas and attacked the magician who was readying a healing spell.

“Damn it, the white monster again!”

“Fuck! It's targeting the supporters first!”

“Melee people, help!”

The magician held himself in a ready stance with his staff, even while I was enveloping him. Perhaps he still remembered my previous shapeshifting.

But I wasn't going to do that all the time. Unlike my gaseous form, my humanoid form was actually quite vulnerable to physical damage.

I was delaying the magician's healing. As long as the Cerberus took the opportunity to finish off the tank, we should have a much higher chance of winning this.

...but my expectations were betrayed.

“Whoa, what the hell is wrong with this thing?!”

As the warriors attacked the berserk head of the wolf, it changed target from the tank to them.

Damn it, why?! Just a bit more and the tank would've died! The calm head also looked like they wanted to finish off the tank, and suddenly, the cooperation between the heads were gone. The Cerberus started rampaging without reason or rhyme. And then, the wolf abruptly charged at me.

Wa-Wait, wait, no, why?!

I escaped in a hurry, but still got hit. The magician lost his balance and promptly found his neck between the wolf's fangs.

“AAaaAghh!!?”

The Cerberus unceremoniously bit down and *crushed* his head.

“Fuck, what's wrong with these monsters?!”

“We're retreating! Use Bind-type skills to hold it!”

“Got it! [**Shadow Bind**]!”

The archer's odd-looking arrow stabbed into the Cerberus's shadow. The wolf continued to rampage, but they couldn't leave the spot.

“What about the white one?!”

“Stop it with spells! **[Combat Arts]** if that doesn’t work! Drink potions if you’re out of magic!”

Obviously, I had no intention to face off against eight beta players by my lonesome. I looked at the Cerberus’ eyes, and I could see even the calm head returning to its former madness like when I first met them, so I decided to retreat here.

Luckily, the beta testers didn’t pursue.

According to what I’d learned here, the attacks on me were due to a game event that was going on. The alpha testers’

locations were constantly broadcasted. Nowhere was safe for me.

I didn’t plan on having the Cerberus as a neighbor, so I silently grabbed Blobsy and left. I followed along the mountain range, going through craggy terrain and steep cliffs. This should make it much harder for the beta players to follow me.

Hopefully I could survive through this event just by wandering around these mountains, I thought gloomily. A quick check confirmed that no one was near me. I sighed in relief.

I wondered if there was somewhere to hide away... The beta players already knew where I was, but at least I wouldn’t be getting sniped. Dying that way would be *terribly* unfunny.

Wait... that cliff face over there. I think I saw a hole. I headed there, thinking to have a bit of a rest, and found out it was some sort of den for a rather large animal.

Perhaps I could Evolve now, after that fight. If so, I might be able to win even against that beta player party.

[Shedy] [Race: White Ghast] [Low Demon (High-Rank)]

□ A low demon made of dust and gases. An intelligent spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 433/502] 25↑

[Total Combat Power: 482/499]

[Unique Skill: Reroll] [Racial Skill: Fear]

[Simple Identification] [Humanoid Form (Normal)] [Skilled Packer]

[✖Evolution Unavailable]

Yes, my magic finally broke 500! And my... evolution... unavailable? *Unavailable?! Why?* And my combat power didn't follow my magic this time!

...okay, deep breath, calm down, let's just identify that line...

[✖Evolution Unavailable]

☐As of the current game version, no further monster evolutions is implemented.

☐New evolutions are planned for Beta Version 2.0.

What...? So us alpha testers couldn't evolve any further? If I couldn't evolve, did that mean my combat power was stuck here?

What should I do? Even if I survived past this event, how was I to hang on for half a year with JUST THIS?

boing

...ah, yeah. I'm fine, Blobsy. It felt like I almost ceased to *exist* for a moment there. Thanks to the little jiggly ball, I regained some measure of control.

Alright, let's think positive. I no longer needed to sleep with this body. That meant that if I could escape to the sea, beta players wouldn't be able to reach me, right? Well, not like I even knew where it was.

I started to climb up the mountain, thinking I might be able to see where the ocean was... hmm? What was this? I saw scratches on the rock face. There were a lot of them.

No, wait, they weren't just scratches... they were *English*.

Who wrote this? Could it be... this was the Cerberus's lair?

Even in my humanoid form, I still couldn't write very well. I couldn't imagine how long and how much effort it took to carve these letters.

The handwriting was horrible and at the same time, desperate. I started reading.

My name is Hans. If anyone can read this, I have left these words behind so that you can know the truth of the corporation behind World of Yggdrasia, and the truth of this world.

I am test subject No. 01. I was granted the body of a 'Fiend Wolf'. I was dropped into this world as a test subject for an experiment investigating the mental stress of using monster avatars.

I knew it. That Cerberus really was an alpha tester...

The monster avatars, our avatars, had been calibrated to a horrifying degree. No normal game developer would allow this.

They explained to us testers that our sensitivity would be set to the maximum. They neglected to mention that it was the hardware's maximum, not the software's.

Pain was several times the normal amount. Eyes so sharp I could see through darkness clear as day, and my hearing was similarly powerful. I was shuddering just from the wind touching my skin. My sensitivity was so high I couldn't even sleep. I had expected these to an extent, but even with that, my mind was quickly pushed to its limits.

Perhaps monsters not very sensitive to pain, such as slimes or avatar types with an undefined form, would have an easier time. But they had to deal with a problem no normal avatars had to: the ludicrous sense of disconnect from their real bodies. At least, I wouldn't be able to bear with it.

As a matter of fact, according to my own investigations, almost every testers who used amorphous avatars had logged out after a few days. I didn't see any of them return.

If there was someone who can handle such avatars, I think it would take a person with an incredibly diminished sense of self.

...well, I used to have people rejecting my existence all the time...

The purpose of this experiment was to design a system that could

make use of a monster's power, a power wholly non-human, as much as possible. They would test the limits that a human can endure, and what the user couldn't, they would leave to an AI's management. But that wasn't to implement 'Human and Monster PVP' into the game as was explained to us 100 testers.

It was for limited warfare. For use in invasions. Once all of us alpha testers are gone, they would begin a secret beta test with the army's soldiers.

Warfare...? And they were planning to grind all of us down to dust just for data?

I had discovered the truth. I had talked to my allies. We planned on taking refuge in this world, the world that the government was planning to invade.

You must be wondering what world I was talking about. But you must have already realized, right? You're here reading this, after all. Look at the incredibly realistic scenery. The people with thoughts so complex no AI could possibly be driving them. Don't you think it feel just the same as using an avatar to visit somewhere else on Earth?

You must have realized that this world of Yggdrasia isn't just a bundle of data on a server. It is no fiction. Yggdrasia truly exists.

...what?

This world of Yggdrasia actually existed...?

Was he saying this was an actual planet somewhere in the universe? I read on, hoping that the words could shed light upon my confusion.

This place was discovered due to my mother and her power: manipulation of cyberspace. Thirty years ago, when my mother was still active as a hacker, her power was analyzed. The results became the foundation of the very first brain-computer interface VR system.

A certain corporation in the defense industry recruited her. In her time working there, she accidentally discovered a faint disturbance in cyberspace. Further investigations and analysis revealed a world entirely separate from Earth.

Yet, that world was much too far away. With the use of the latest technology of the time, Digistruction, they sent a scouting drone that could create its own light sources through. It turned out that the planetary system this new world belonged to did not correlate to any records on Earth. Yggdrasia itself was determined to be an Earth-like planet, but its atmosphere was different and more importantly, unsuitable for Earth humans.

So someone found out about this planet... Then why did no one publicize this? It would've been the find of the century...

or perhaps, **somebody** wanted this to be kept a secret?

Regardless, investigations continued. The corporation had officially received the government's blessings to continue the survey. They found out that this world was surprisingly similar to Earth in culture, and that the native humans' level of civilization was equivalent to Earth's Middle Ages.

The similarities received heavy attention from the scholars. In the end, they came to a conclusion: the form of energy that had created the dimensional disturbance had also, in the past, caused some sort of information to travel both ways between Earth and the new world. Natives in the new world called that energy 'Mana'.

Mana... So if this world was real, then did that mean magic was real, too?

This world was sustained by the infinite mana created from the World Tree and its Saplings. Compared to the other races of the new world, the 'humans' there were relatively weak, but could quickly increase their population. They had founded

countries, like parasites leeching off the Tree and the Saplings. Yet despite their achievements, they were only using mana as fuel for the special ability they called Magic.

The corporation wanted to explore the possibility of using mana as a source of normal energy. They, and their government, believed that drone surveying wasn't enough. After deciphering the native language, they pretended themselves to be God to the kings of the larger countries, complete with divine prophecies.

The false God gained faith with agricultural reforms, simple yet convenient technology for the mass, and other such improvements. With trust now cemented, God told the people to research about mana, and to create the technological foundation for using mana to power tools.

So they put on a mask of God, granted the native people technology, then had them begin research. Where were they going with this?

The research was successful, and the first applications were in developments of magitech tools that served a role similar to electrical appliances. With the technology transfer, in just ten-odd years, magitech trains and airships were born. Before Earth's intervention, the human population in Yggdrasia were several hundreds of millions. With access to powerful magical barriers and weapons, in ten years, that number quickly swelled.

At first, it was simply intellectual curiosity. Next, the corporation wanted to find a way to utilize the faint mana they detected from the dimensional tear. Then ten years ago, everything changed when they discovered the child that would be called No. 17.

Native fauna on Yggdrasia could kill other life-forms to absorb magic and lifeforce from their victims, and convert them into their own power. And No. 17, found in Tibet, had the same ability. With the results from analyzing the child's genome, the corporation established a method to gather mana by having the remote-controlled drones kill other living beings.

Did that mean that when I defeated enemies and raised my magic, a part of that was sent to Earth? And perhaps the death penalty that cut my magic in half was also for this purpose.

From observing the new world, they understood that it was possible to send 'waves', like radio signals, through the dimensional distortion. From the fact that mana was faintly leaking to Earth, they hypothesized that mana was a form of wave that suffused the atmosphere. Based on that theory, they succeeded in creating a system to send the mana that the drones gathered to Earth.

At the time, there was no way to make the drones even decently powerful. However, the problem was solved once they discovered No.

His power was to materialize ‘force of will’. Combining it with another power previously analyzed – the power to convert materials from the surroundings or from the atmosphere into amino acids and other such biological matter – the corporation was no longer limited to robotic drones. They could now create the human form, so similar as to be indistinguishable from real human beings.

The VR avatar system had already been introduced on Earth by then. Higher realism came with its own problems, such as mental instability. To investigate these problems further, and at the same time seeing the opportunity of infinite energy in the form of mana, an opportunity that arose once sending human avatars into the new world became possible, the government invested a vast sum of money into the corporation and told them to develop a system for large-scale mana harvesting.

Which resulted in this game, *World of Yggdrasia*.

I see... Just the beta test alone already had three million applicants. If the same amount of people bought the game when it’s officially released, the corporation would basically gain three million soldiers *and* their money, too.

But the government judged that the game alone wouldn’t be enough to cover the country’s energy needs. They urged the development of weapons that could gather mana more efficiently, weapons that could be deployed on both Earth and the other world. Non-humanoid remote-controlled weapons. Monster avatars.

This corporation had branch offices everywhere on Earth. Within research centers masquerading as orphanages, they conducted analyses upon the twenty people with special abilities that they’d gathered. With the completion of mana-gathering avatars, now the corporation was looking into investigating the problematic sensation of Disconnect that was happening to monster avatars. They were planning on pushing us secret alpha testers into the worst circumstances possible, as a part of their experiment. They would see all of us bled dry.

So we were just disposable pawns... and that inhumane orphanage

was even one of theirs.

Writing this must have taken No. 01 days. In the beginning, the words were chicken scrawls, but they got better as time went on. And then... they started to deteriorate.

Us secret alpha testers were orphans from around the world, every single one possessing some sort of mysterious power.

But many of us were orphaned in suspicious happenings. Some of our parents were killed, some bankrupt, some gone by other means.

At first, there were only twenty-three of us. We were gathered at the research center, with numbers becoming our new names. Then, at the government's behest, the corporation added another seventy-seven despite their trivial abilities.

Exactly one hundred of us were dropped into this new world.

Around here was the point where No. 01's mind must have been breaking down. His words began to veer off-course, letters started varying in sizes, and once in a while I could see deep gouges in the rock wall.

My mother, the woman who discovered this world, were pushing her power more and more with each investigation. In the end, it crippled her. I inherited the same power, even if mine was much weaker. Then I met No. 08 and No. 17 at the research institution's orphanage. We spent our childhoods with only each other to turn to.

With my power, we had managed to infiltrate the personal computer of a researcher through the internet. That was how we knew we were only disposable test subjects. We had no families, no friends aside from each other in the real world, in Earth. So we started looking for ways to escape to the new world.

That's... impossible, right? Weren't they using avatars because they couldn't send live humans here?

The Unique Skills of us secret alpha testers were based on our real abilities. With the mana native to Yggdrasia, perhaps our powers could be strengthened.

[Materialization of Will] , **[Absorption of Magic and Lifeforce]** , and **[Mental Manipulation of Cyberspace]** . These are our powers. If we can use them to their full potential, we should be able to escape the shackles of the System, transfer our consciousness, and gain new living bodies here on this world. Even if doing it would send our real bodies into a coma,

there's a high chance the corporation would still keep us powered people alive. As long as our connection to the machine were still intact, no matter how tenuous it might be, I could still maintain and strengthen it through our minds.

But our plan was a failure. We underestimated them.

It was a desperate plan, born from children clutching onto faint hope.

Here, No. 01's handwriting began to turn outright misshapen.

They wanted to use us until our minds either broke down, or until our brains stopped working altogether. The broken ones only had an extra month of life support. After that, they would be disposed of.

The corporation's promise of 'half a year' that they told us? An utter lie. We were never meant to survive that long.

Day after day, I saw myself losing bits and pieces of my mind. My first death here, in this world, was a revelation: with our sense of pain adjusted to the maximum, the moment of death brings with it agony like nothing else. Among those of us who had avatars with a sense of pain, that first death must have sent dozens into comas. Especially the younger kids.

And the feeling of Disconnection, too, they worsened day by day. I thought I could hold myself together with a familiar animal form, but once I evolved, I grew another head.

That head is just a beast. Violence is all that drives it. It would take any opportunity to take control of my body.

I can't rest even for one second. I can't sleep. It would eat me alive if I so much as close my eyes.

I didn't know how bad he had it. But I could see how far gone he was from his deteriorating letters.

Whoever's reading this, if you're a secret alpha tester like us, then you must take our magic stones. All three of ours. We promised to each other to keep our powers in the stones so that even if one of us died, the rest could still live on.

Perhaps it's impossible. It would be the end once our real bodies were destroyed, after all. But there must be a way. It must be possible. The World Tree with infinite mana is here. The holy land that surrounded it rejects normal monsters, but maybe a monster with the ability to absorb magic can find a way.

I can't do it. This is the end for me. There were only around 20 of us alpha testers left. I found that out after infiltrating their monitoring system. Even No. 17 had lost his mind. He was much too kind. His heart couldn't endure this life of kill-or-be-killed.

By the time you read this, if the two-headed wolf is still alive, then please...

Please kill me.

His words stopped here. After that, it was just the scratchings of a maddened beast.

I was relatively sane thanks to a series of fortunate coincidences, but it looked like everyone else didn't have my luck.

Most of them had broken.

It must have been torturous... yet you still held on, fighting those beta players. You didn't want to die by the hands of that corporation, right?

...yeah. I got it.

I won't let them kill you.

I'll lay you to rest myself.

[The Guidedog]

Hello, everyone. Thank you for continuing to support *World of Yggdrasia*.

How about this event? Did you have fun?

My, my, you can't fight because the death penalty is too scary? For the less adventurous of our beta players, we have good news!

The number of [**Berserkers**] has finally been reduced to seven.

As of the moment, the death penalty has been removed until the event is over! And would you believe it, everyone will also receive a Boost Ticket for free! (Boost Tickets will be available for purchase in the cash shop in a later date) Let us all fight for the prizes!

Chapter 19 THE FINAL ALPHA TESTER

The experiment started with one hundred testers. Under the torturous mental assault, most of them had already left the living world. Within the 7th research center, the fates of the last seven testers were being reported on monitors.

“Secret alpha tester No. 09. Confirmed mental collapse and subsequent termination of consciousness. Subject has been logged out. As per procedure, requesting transport to collection facility.”

“Secret alpha tester No. 15. Confirmed mental collapse and subsequent cessation of neural activities. As per procedure, requesting dispatch of disposal team.”

Five alpha testers left.

To fulfill the promise with No. 01, I headed towards where he was fighting the beta testers. I didn't even remember his real face.

[Shedy] [Race: White Ghast] [Low Demon (High-Rank)]

☐ A low demon made of dust and gases. An intelligent spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 502/502]

[Total Combat Power: 499/499]

[Unique Skill: Reroll] [Racial Skill: Fear]

[Simple Identification] [Humanoid Form (Normal)] [Skilled Packer]

[✖Evolution Unavailable]

It had been a whole day since that fight. I'd already healed up.

Was I just nervous about fighting him? Or did knowing the **truth** changed something in my consciousness? The sense of Disconnect used to feel horrible that first few days. Now it was nearly gone. Before I knew it, I had learned to control this body of mist like I'd always been born with it.

I wondered if I was mad, too, in my own way...

When I was going towards yesterday's battlefield, I detected three signals with high magic heading straight here. Probably beta players coming to hunt me.

"There it is! That's the white mist monster mentioned on the website!"

"Awesome! Man, I thought someone else already got it!"

"Everyone used their tickets, yeah? Then let's go!"

Two front line warrior-types, one shield holder. All of them were around 120 combat power.

Why did these guys even bother coming?

I charged at them at top speed. An arrow whizzed towards me. Before it could hit, I scattered myself thin to reduce the damage, while at the same time shooting out a part of me to wrap around the bow-wielding warrior.

"Holy shit, what's this?!"

"Dude, didn't you read about how it could transform?!"

"Hang on, it's gonna get hot!"

One warrior sheathed his sword, then flung fire from his hand.

I immediately gathered into my humanoid form, hiding behind the bow-wielding warrior while stabbing his abdomen with my dagger. He screamed.

Burned and stabbed, he departed as motes of light. The scene shocked the other warrior still. I rushed at him, covering his whole body, and began to absorb his life.

“I’m saving you, hold on!”

My victim’s health was plummeting. The shieldbearer unsheathed his own sword and ran towards me, but his steps slowed mid-way. Perhaps the image of his friend burning another one alive was still fresh on his mind. I took the chance to finish draining my victim dry, and once again, another player scattered as light.

“W-Why?! Why is the mist so strong?! Event monsters aren’t supposed to be this difficult!” The shield-bearer shouted in his turmoil.

Well, that would be because I wasn’t an event monster. Also, I might look white, but I wasn’t actually ‘mist’. ‘Gases’

would be more accurate, really.

I dispersed my gaseous body into a large cloud to make him **[Fear]** me. Then while he was rooted to the spot, I engulfed and drained him dry.

[Shedy] [Race: White Ghast] [Low Demon (High-Rank)]

[Magic Points: 509/540] 38↑

[Total Combat Power: 499/499]

“Secret alpha tester No. 03. Confirmed mental collapse and subsequent termination of consciousness. Subject has been logged out. As per procedure, requesting transport to collection facility.”

“Secret alpha tester No. 20. Confirmed mental collapse and subsequent termination of consciousness. Subject has been logged out. As per procedure, requesting transport to collection facility.”

Three alpha testers left.

So it's confirmed, then. My combat power didn't rise any further, even if my magic did.

I had a bad feeling about this. So I didn't bother looting them and just headed straight towards yesterday's battlefield. As I was getting closer, more and more magical signals that I assumed to be beta players showed up on my radar.

There were far, far more than yesterday. A quick count already showed at least thirty. And right in the center, riddled with wounds, was the Cerberus. No. 01 was putting up a good fight all by his lonesome.

[Cerberus - No. 01]

[Magic Points: 225/422] [Hit Points: 176/537]

[Total Combat Power: 499]

Everywhere on his body were burns, bruises, gashes. No patch of skin was left unbloodied.

Five shield holders were surrounding him. Just the vanguard alone already had around twenty people. Some distance away, magicians were restricting his movements and throwing powerful spells.

More than half the beta players had over 200 combat power.

Yet No. 01 still hung on, even if only barely. The reason became evident as I moved closer.

"Stop getting in our way already!"

"We told you, we had dibs on it!"

"And who the hell just cut into our fight, huh?! Fuck off!"

"There's barely any event monster left! You think we're leaving just because you tell us to?!"

Apparently, multiple different parties were fighting over him. The latecomers probably forced their way in and tried to killsteal.

I dove into the field of carnage. Someone noticed and shouted.

“There’s that white monster again!”

“There, that one’s for you late parties!”

“Shit! Fine, but this isn’t over, you hear me?!”

That final reluctant, caustic reply came from a party of six. They left the group of players surrounding No. 01 and headed towards me.

“Aww shit, an intangible type?! What a pain in the ass. Why don’t we return to that wolf instead?”

“Don’t you still have plenty of MP? Spells and combat arts should work. Just deal with this one quickly, then we can get back to killstealing the other one.”

“Fuck yeah, let’s go!”

Damn you. If you’re not taking this seriously, you don’t get to stand in my way!!

I dispersed myself to the absolute limit that my consciousness could handle to minimize the damage from arrows and spells. As a five-meters wide cloud, I charged forward to engulf all of them.

“What the hell’s this?!”

“I can’t see shit. Where’s the real body?!”

No, I didn’t have one. The confusion must have led them to the wrong conclusion. I began lightly draining the whole party while they still couldn’t find their way outside. At the same time, I gathered myself at the neck of the magician who was firing the most dangerous spells, creating just an arm to slice his neck with my dagger.

He collapsed on the ground, dumbfounded. Creating the arm lessened the mist density by the same amount, so everyone else noticed his death.

“Come on man, this ain’t a joke. What the hell’s with this monster?!”

“Think later, just get out of here first! And don’t group up!”

As I expected, lower density meant lower absorption speed. I didn't get much, but some healing was better than nothing.

On whose order, I didn't know, but they were getting ready to scatter. I set my eyes on my next target, the archer with a powerful enchanted bow.

Even among the beta players, there were the experienced gamers and the newcomers. This archer was the former. I had to crush him while I still had the chance.

“It's coming here?! **[Shadow Bind]**!”

The archer's mouth twitched something fierce. He shot the same spell I saw the other day at the ground under me.

[Reroll]

He **[Fear]** ed me, even if only for a moment, and that was enough for me to resist his spell. I shrunk myself down to a humanoid form of loose gas, about as large as an adult, without actually engaging the shapeshifting skill. The archer was still petrified when I wrapped my arm around his neck and drained him dry.

Seeing me, the other party members stumbled back a step. Fear was evident on their faces. Except the thuggish leader.

“Fucking shit, why the hell are we getting downed so quickly?!”

His face reddened with rage. He approached, swinging his sword in wild abandon.

But I didn't have time to play with you.

“Whaa!?”

“It's running away!”

I left their shouts behind me and moved at top speed toward No. 01, still embroiled in battle.

“Chase after it! Don't lose it!”

We were approaching No. 01. The people surrounding the wolf angrily yelled at the party behind my back.

“The white one’s here again! What the hell were you doing, idiots?! You can’t even keep it away!”

“Shut your trap!!”

“Secret alpha tester No. 08. Confirmed mental collapse and subsequent cessation of neural activity. Subject has been logged out. As per procedure, requesting dispatch of disposal team.”

Two secret alpha testers left.

Far away, No. 01 shivered. He let out a howl full of grief.

[Cerberus - No. 01]

[Magic Points: 179/434] [Hit Points: 65/550]

[Total Combat Power: 499]

He was nearly down. I headed straight for him, but the people in front of me flung spells upon my path.

Out of the way! He is mine!

A few hit. I changed my position. At the same time, I detected a spell being fired from behind me.

[Reroll]

I barely managed to dodge. The spell continued to hit a magician who was tying up No. 01’s movements.

They screamed, losing their calm. I turned into my gaseous humanoid form again and gave them a hug. The last bits of their lifeforce quickly emptied.

[Shedy] [Race: White Ghast] [Low Demon (High-Rank)]

[Magic Points: 464/558] 18↑

[Total Combat Power: 499/499]

“What the hell are you doing?!”

“Shut the fuck up! *You* stop hitting our prey!”

The groups didn’t care that I killed a few of their party members. They started insulting each other. A few warriors from the group surrounding No. 01 readied their weapons against the thuggish party leader, protecting their magicians and archers.

In the meantime, I picked up the rapier that dropped from the magician I killed. I made a dash for No. 01.

“Stop the white one!”

Except for the four shield-holders, the rest of the vanguard readied their weapons and approached me. Spells and arrows shot out from behind them, piercing through me.

“**[Sword Slash] !**”

The warrior’s art hit. My consciousness blurred for a moment.

[Shedy] [Race: White Ghast] [Low Demon (High-Rank)]

[Magic Points: 371/558]

[Total Combat Power: 426/499]

Both my magic and power took a huge hit. But I could still fight. The attack staggered me, but I kept moving. An axe-wielding warrior ran, getting ready to jump at me with another strange combat art.

“My turn! **[Razing-**”

[Reroll]

“Wha?!”

His foothold was unstable. My skill tripped him and I slipped past through his side.

[Shedy] [Race: White Ghast] [Low Demon (High-Rank)]

[Magic Points: 336/558]

[Total Combat Power: 391/499]

“Don’t let it join up with the Cerber-aargh!”

A shieldbearer turned in my direction. The moment he did, No. 01 fired a ray of lightning from his horn, scorching his back.

[Cerberus - No. 01]

[Magic Points: 112/434] [Hit Points: 34/550]

[Total Combat Power: 499]

“Archers! Stop it NOW!”

“Got it, [Shadow Bind]!”

[Reroll]

Dammit, still couldn’t get out. No, there’s still a chance. Again!

[Reroll] [Reroll] [Reroll] [Reroll]

“Shit, it’s out already?!”

My assumption was that at the moment, I wasn’t rolling to resist the binding attack, I was rolling to dispel it. So I retried a few times, and my gamble paid off.

[Shedy] [Race: White Ghast] [Low Demon (High-Rank)]

[Magic Points: 236/558]

[Total Combat Power: 291/499]

“Shit! I’ll hold it off! [Get Over Here]!”

As a shieldbearer used an unfamiliar art, he started to glow, looking

very eye-catching.

[Reroll] [Reroll]

My vision returned to normal. Once I flew past his head, I saw the near-dead Cerberus' right head look at me... No. 01.

Madness retreated from his eyes, and I thought... I thought I saw him smile. And then he bit into the left head, preventing it from attacking me.

Yeah... I'm here.

I shaped myself into the gaseous humanoid form, then stabbed No. 01 through his forehead with my rapier.

The blade broke. I clung onto his neck, absorbing all of his remaining magic. No. 01 disappeared in specks of light, releasing a blue magic stone. It was then sucked inside my body.

“Secret alpha tester No. 01. Confirmed mental collapse and subsequent cessation of neural activity. As per procedure, requesting dispatch of disposal team.”

One secret alpha tester left.

[Shedy] [Race: White Ghast] [Low Demon (High-Rank)]

□ A low demon made of dust and gases. An intelligent spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 212/658] 100↑

[Total Combat Power: 267/499]

players were staring at me with evident terror.

But I won't go quietly.

“Secret alpha tester No. 13. Confirmed mental collapse and subsequent termination of consciousness. Subject has been logged out. As per procedure, requesting transport to collection facility. As of the moment, all 100 secret alpha testers have been logged out.”

Once the logout procedure for the final tester was finished, the monitoring room exploded in cheers of relief. It had been a whole month of constant monitoring 24/7, even if the watchers were rotated in shifts.

Deputy Director Brian and his secretary entered the room. He congratulated the staff with theatrics:

“Awesome work, everyone. The experiment’s runtime was cut down by quite a lot from our original plan of half a year, but thanks to all of your efforts, we’ve gained some amazing data. There’s a barbecue and some beers waiting for you in the courtyard. Anyone who’s finished their work, feel free to take your rest. Ah, people working into the night, don’t touch the beers, alright? Cokes are all you’re getting.”

The employees left their seats, with a few chuckling at Brian’s words. There was still work left to be done, but for now, it was time to celebrate the completion of a smooth-sailing project.

Monitors and displays were turned off, one after another. The staff were all in the courtyard by now, with only the secretary giving the room a final check to see if there was anyone still staying behind. As she left the room, the door locked behind her, an unbidden thought came to her mind.

“...subject 13...”

An albino girl. Only eleven, yet with eyes far more mature.

Spiritual-type avatars were considered to be the worst type to use. Despite that, she had survived until the very end, her mind unyielding.

But in the end, even she broke. Her consciousness was gone. At least the data she left behind would be of great use for the next wave of secret beta testers.

Testers with collapsed psyches would continue to be observed for the next thirty days. After that, they would be disposed of.

She remembered the sight of the alabaster girl, with scarlet eyes that reminded one of nothing so much as a rabbit. Perhaps she should come see the girl one last time, even if her body was now nothing but an empty shell.

But... something feels strange here, the secretary thought.

The other testers had had their minds broken after their own deaths. But this girl wasn't like them. Could that mental fortitude of steel be so easily broken just after one or two times dying?

Some time later.

Within the empty locked room lit only by faint emergency exit lights, one of the screens flickered on. Lines of text ran through the display.

.....

.....

.....

[Evolution Available]

.....

.....

[Y/N?]

.....

.....

[Y]

Suddenly, the main monitor display turned on. Appearing on the large screen was the silhouette of a snow-white girl with drooping rabbit ears.

She pursed her lips in a **demonic** smirk.

Author's note: A bit of explanation for the mana harvesting.

After the dimensional tear and subsequently the new world had been discovered, the company experimented to see what they could send through. Physical objects didn't work, but 'waves' such as radio signals did. They also detected some mana leaking into Earth, albeit faint, and so they hypothesized that mana was a sort of energy wave floating around in the atmosphere.

All native fauna shared a trait: the ability to kill other lifeforms to gain mana. By creating remote-controlled vessels directly in the new world, granting them the same ability, then sending them to kill the local monsters, vessels would gather mana. Once they logged out, any extra mana – or in case of player deaths, half of their magic as a penalty – would be sent back through a collection facility built inside Temples, the spawning spots for players.

Currently, research into other methods to directly gather mana besides using remote-controlled vessels were still ongoing, but practical implementations were a long way away.

The new world was estimated to have around a few hundred millions native humans. And to gather magic from these people, they needed monsters. Which was the reason for the creation of "Beta Monster Avatars", developed as a more efficient method of mana harvesting.

Due to the fact that the new world's human race was not considered to be the same as Earth's humanity, and thus received no protection from Earth's human rights, invasions were not considered to be infringing on any laws.

On paper, mana was supposed to be used as a new source of clean energy. But in closed rooms, people were thinking about using monster avatars, which had demonstrated power equivalent to tanks while still having the mobility of beasts, in limited warfare on Earth.

Chapter 20 A NEW BEGINNING

It had been one month since the start of the official beta test for the new VRMMORPG, *World of Yggdrasia*. The game came packaged with the newest VR system, and had become the talk of the town for its *incredible* realism. It was unlike any VR games before.

The game had just concluded its first official event, **Subdue the Berserkers**. Criticism had been mixed, in part due to the overly inconsistent strength of the event monsters; their too-real, too-terrifying behaviors; and other reasons. But in general, player responses were positive. And once the developers released an official video showcasing some of the best battles of the event, the internet was immediately abuzz with impatient people asking for the official game release.

Ever since the beta test began, the ten thousand chosen testers had been enjoying their travels of the lands and busying themselves with sharing information and playful whinings on the VR chatrooms. And today was no different.

“Y’all thought being able to spawn in any timezone was convenient, right? Yeah, I thought so too. And then it turned out that if you mostly game at night and choose to spawn in the morning, like me, you’re gonna get some really shitty jet lag.

I’ve been seeing sunlight all day.”

“I know, right? Then I got way too hooked in this game and logged in in the morning too, but then it’s night in-game and there’s nothing happening in town.”

“Don’t the bigger cities have the red-light districts? The place’s a bit dangerous, but at least you can pass the night there.”

“Ah, I’m actually not 18 yet, so I’ve been playing the all-ages version...”

“Oh, whoops. Never mind, then.”

“Hey, there are kids here. Stop it with the topics.”

“Got it.” “Sorry.”

“So this also ties in to the timezone thing, but did you know you can teleport to a distant Temple and register your new spawn there? Only once though, and you can’t bring anything besides event items.”

“Hey, did you see the new trailer? It looks amazing.”

“Yeah, they used actual scenes from the event monster fights, right? Only one spawned in my area, and when I logged in it’s already dead.”

“Apparently a few of them could respawn several times. Though they seemed to stopped after three times killing them.”

“And those respawnable ones were generally pretty strong. I heard quite a lot of the rank 2 parties died to them.”

“BTW, how high do the ranks... actually ‘skill level’ is the right word, isn’t it? So how high can they get?”

“I think the devs said it’s 10? But both the current version and the official release are only going to get to 5, apparently.”

“Yeah. If you take combat skill level 5 to be an expert, then you’re going to see Rank 6 only with top-class knights, probably?”

“First time I’ve seen a game with players weaker than NPCs...”

“That’s a realism-oriented game for you. We’ll probably be seeing those top-class knights all over the town in a few years, though...”

“Man, I wish there was another monster-killing event. This time’s reward was a year-pass for the airship, right?”

“Yeah, it’s super convenient for traveling and changing spawn points.

A pity the normal price's pretty much equal to buying a mansion."

"So only around 500 people got one, right?"

"Personally, I don't really care. The country I picked is already so huge I'm not even sure I can explore all of it. Besides, those bosses I saw in the trailer looked hella scary! Seriously, there's gotta be a limit to realism."

"I mean, the ones in the trailer were the ten most powerful monsters, I think? They all got a lot of player kills under their belts before they're dead. I don't think the event monsters are all like that, but I have to agree they were fucking crazy.

Really have to wonder what kind of AI the devs were using."

"'Crazy' is right. I could actually feel the insanity. Maybe they recruited a horror game dev from somewhere else?"

"Oh yeah, did you hear? The devs tweeted that the official release may have monster avatars to choose from."

"For real? Then does that mean I can play as something like the trailer bosses?!"

"What are they going to do about the Disconnection? I read about this 120-kilo old dude who only changed his body type and age, and he still had to deal with tons of problems before he could get used to it."

"The tweet didn't go into much details, only that the parts that cause the Disconnection are going to be automated."

"So I can have two heads or turn into mist, too?"

"Bad news for you, bro. Amorphous avatars have way too many parts to automate, so they're probably going to be shelved."

"Man, the last three were insane. Terrifying looks are one thing, but they're also hella fast and hit *hard*."

“The last three were the ravenous toad, the two-headed fiend wolf, and the white mist, right?”

“I heard they’re all super powerful.”

“I have a Rank 2 friend that spawned in another country. They said their party of three challenged the white mist, but they literally died in *seconds*.”

“The white one that showed up at the end of the trailer, right? That scene scared the hell out of me, even when I knew it was just a video! You know, the one where it turned into a vague human shape while holding a broken sword, and then did a slasher smile. Holy shit!”

“Yeah, scary... but I think it looked kinda cool too.”

“Deputy Director, we’ve finished the collection process for the secret alpha testers currently in comas due to collapsed psyches, all 57 of them. This is the request to start the 30-days monitoring process from the collection facility staff. Please sign here.”

“Yeah yeah... alright, that’s done, right?”

“Thank you.”

The secretary of the 7th research center entered the Deputy Director’s room with electronic documents in hand. Brian touched his finger in a few spots. The documents changed color from a light-yellow tint to a light-blue, acknowledging Brian’s fingerprints. He gave the documents back.

The secretary bowed lightly, then gingerly asked. “Deputy Director, should I be present for the testers’ disposal thirty days later?”

“Well, *somebody* should. If you’re volunteering, all the better. Is there any reason why you asked?”

“Not quite... If I had to say, perhaps I just wanted to send off the girl who survived the whole thing.”

“I suppose that’s how you women are, so sentimental... No. 13, right? I thought putting her in for the final scene of the trailer would be a great idea, and I was right! Man, that part was awesome, wasn’t it?”

“...it was. However, it may lead to more people requesting amorphous avatars, once the official release is out and people can choose to play as simple monster avatars. Will it be a problem?”

“Aaaahh... yeah, that.”

Their plans for the first unveiling of monster avatars included 15 different types. They did not include amorphous monsters.

These avatar types were too unstable in terms of movements and body shapes. To use them with any modicum of skill, players would have to delegate most of the processing to the AI’s automation, and in essence this would make it no different from playing with a gamepad, like how old games used to be.

“I mean, amorphous monsters aren’t good to use in the first place. They have weak attacks *and* are highly vulnerable to magic. To fully utilize their strong points, the players would need to be able to freely transform themselves, but that’s totally impossible for normal people. If anything, No. 13 was simply way too much of an exception.” Brian let loose a stream of words, almost sounding like he was making excuses.

The secretary only nodded. “Indeed. Even among the secret alpha testers, she was unique...”

“The players should understand once we disclose the combat power data for amorphous monsters. So anyway,” Brian smiled sweetly, after confirming that most of his work for the day was done. “I’m off work now. Wanna have dinner? I know a place.”

The beautiful woman smiled back, just as sweet.

“I’ll sue you for abuse of authority.”

To most, *World of Yggdrasia* was an open-world game. A fictional world.

Only a select few of a certain corporation and the top brass of a certain country's government were aware of the truth.

That this world was real.

And it was changing. Under the influence of the unaware beta testers and the undercover staff members, Yggdrasia was changing.

In the northern reaches of the central continent lay Trestan, one of the large countries of Yggdrasia. In a nearby grassy field, a petite traveler clad in a cloak was walking in silence, steadily, tirelessly.

From their height, perhaps they hadn't even passed ten years of age. The oversized cloak of a grown man covered them whole. The hem was ragged with tears and dirtied by the ground. Pale, bare feet peeked out with every step they took.

There were small monsters, wolves, and other such creatures living in this area of grassland. A single child traveling would be suicidal. Yet at the moment, the beasts had all hidden themselves, almost as if in fear. The child had not been attacked even once.

Following behind their steps was a bouncing ball of slime, its color of light-green masking it among the grass. The child raised their head. A mischievous breeze blew past, pulling the hood down.

Revealing a head of slightly curly hair, so white it almost glimmered in the light; and eyes of scarlet, of faintly shining rubies. Drooping white rabbit ears lightly shivered in front of the chilly wind.

There stood a girl of unearthly beauty.

[Shedy] [Race: Mistral] [Lesser Demon (Low-Rank)]

☐The demon of bewitching mist that dances upon the northern seas. A canny spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 750/750] 92↑

[Total Combat Power: 825/825] 326↑

[Unique Skill: <Reroll> <Cyber-Manipulation>]

[Racial Skill: Fear]

[Simple Identification] [Humanoid Form (Adept)] [Expert Packer]

Chapter 21 FIRST VILLAGE VISIT

It had been three days since that battle. Three days since the secret alpha testers were all gone.

I lost to the beta players, back then. My consciousness was on the verge of being extinguished, but at the very last moment, I managed to escape the clutches of the System and evolved.

I lived.

I didn't know how I was able to evolve. Perhaps the blue magic stone from No. 01 had something to do with it.

At first, I thought that meant he could have evolved, too, but he didn't. Maybe the 'no further evolutions implemented'

mentioned in the text I identified didn't mean that there was a software lock to prevent evolution. Maybe the developers simply *wasn't yet able to* recreate those higher-ranking monsters.

Maybe the corporation still hadn't completed analyzing the powerful monsters in this world.

Then why was I the only one who could evolve? The clues lay inside No. 01's knowledge. It didn't tell me everything, but it was enough to make a guess.

It must be because I was a *Demon*.

Within the blue magic stone was a part of No. 01's knowledge and memories. Perhaps he didn't want his insanity to take these important things away from him, so he had engraved them all inside this stone.

According to his knowledge, there still existed some unidentified monster species. The developers *could* have just removed the choices altogether, but they wanted diversity. So they decided to let the player's consciousness determine their evolutions.

In the end, it seemed like this was the reason why all the other alpha testers who picked these unidentified monsters had had their minds broken upon the first evolution. The form they took was too grotesque, too horrifying to bear.

That was *too* close... Perhaps in a way, my choice of an amorphous monster was the correct one.

In other words, I think I had just managed to, by my own will, *unconsciously determined the self* I wanted to evolve into.

[Shedy] [Race: Mistral] [Lesser Demon (Low-Rank)]

☐The demon of bewitching mist that dances upon the northern seas. A canny spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 750/750] 92↑

[Total Combat Power: 825/825] 326↑

[Unique Skill: <Reroll> <Cyber-Manipulation>]

[Racial Skill: Fear]

[Simple Identification] [Humanoid Form (Adept)] [Expert Packer]

As a result, I was able to evolve and survive. Now I had a whole slew of new things to comment on.

First off, ‘Mistral¹’? “*Oh no, it’s the white mist,*” people kept saying, then I would deny them in my thoughts “*No I’m not, I’m made out of gases, not mist,*” and now look at what happened. I can’t believe their words actually affected me this much...

Then my class. I was *still* at “Lesser”? And “Low-Rank”? Where were all the good adjectives? Who even decided these rankings...? Anyway, it seemed like I still had a long journey ahead.

I gained more magic, and this time my combat power went up correctly. What a relief... If my combat power stayed still forever no matter what I did, I’d be super nervous going into fights with multiple enemies.

Despite killing tons of beta players that time, my magic didn’t grow all that much. No surprise there. When I died, I was still under the shackles of the System, so half of my magic was taken.

And now, I had no further revives. Oh boy...

The unique skill **[Cyber-Manipulation]** used to be No. 01’s ability. It

was how I escaped the System's monitoring.

It wasn't my own skill, so it was quite weak – or rather, I hadn't been able to fully utilize it yet. But mid-way through the process, my consciousness was cut off, and so did their monitoring. For the time being, they should still be believing I was truly gone.

Now, [**Humanoid Form (Adept)**] and [**Expert Packer**].

Let's start with this weird **Packer** thing. To be honest, I think 'Skilled' had already turned into 'Expert' since the last fight, since I noticed that even when dispersed, I still couldn't see the items I was carrying. Where could they be? How curious!

And now, the most important topic of the day. **Humanoid Form**.

As (Normal) turned into (Adept), I got a boost to my magic and density. I didn't need to carefully craft my body, I just needed to remember what I used to look like for a near-perfect mimicry.

But the damn rabbit ears were still there.

They were the same white as my hair. The spindly ears drooped from the top of my head all the way down below my chin.

"Maybe the hood could hide them..."

Blobsy responded to my voice with a bounce.

In the beginning, I couldn't speak. Once my transformation became near-perfect in fidelity, enough so that my mouth could hold air, I started practicing. Then it turned out that if I just let my body's instinct guide me, speech would come rather easily.

Still, my human form was only on the outside. Inside of me continued to be thick mist. It took some practice for me to be able to move like a real human. I spent a whole month moving as an inhuman mass, after all. My walking gait was still wobbly.

Contact with humans was going to be inevitable. I didn't want my mannerism to reveal who I am, so during the brief moments of *no time*, I took the chance to walk around the mountains and generally just practicing being human.

I looked about the same as I used to, so getting used to it probably wouldn't take long.

By manipulating cyberspace and cutting off my consciousness, I had managed to escape the System. Perhaps No. 01

didn't do the same because of the low chance of success. He didn't want to fail and bring trouble to his friends. Yet despite my success, I still wasn't completely free.

I'd been using mana to maintain the monster avatar, and ever since the beginning my brain had already been acting in place of a part of the System to process my actions. There was no problem with me, except for a critical one: my consciousness was *here*, yet my real body... my *soul* was still on Earth.

In No. 01's plan, as long as he was under life support, he could still use **[Cyber-Manipulation]** to maintain the fragile link to his real body. But then, despite his mind already nearing the limits, he risked another use of his ability. He found out that the bodies of the comatose testers would be destroyed after one month.

I had thirty days left to live and to find a solution.

No. 01 said that if I could gather the magic stones from his friends, No. 08 and No. 17, then get to the source of this world's life, the World Tree, perhaps there'd be a way. Fleeting hope, but hope nonetheless.

My clock was counting down... no. Let's stop with the pessimistic thoughts. I could have died in that battle. I should count myself lucky to get a thirty-days extension instead.

It'd be tough going to travel the whole world in just thirty days. Luckily, the humans had high-speed transportations.

Maybe I could get on a magitech train.

So the point of all of this roundabout explanation was that: I needed an appearance that could get me inside the humans'

cities.

Luckily, No. 17 had died relatively close to me. I could follow to the north of the mountain range where I used to be to reach them. There was a high chance the beta party that killed them and took their magic stone was staying in a nearby country.

Within the information No. 01 left behind was a map, complete with

the countries' locations.

Closest to No. 17 was a small country. But if No. 01's magic stone looked like a gem, then maybe No. 17's looked similar, too. Perhaps the beta party would take it to the large country further south to the small country to sell it.

Judging from the location of the mountain range, I should be getting close to that large country by now.

Another half a day of walking through the grassland, and I finally found a small road. Following it, I found a farming village, looking similar to the one I once saw before.

Well, I said 'village', but there were easily a few hundred people living there. And I saw around the same number of beastman slaves working the fields.

...now, the question was, would I be pushed back by the village's barrier? I only saw a fence to defend against wolves, so my guess was that the barrier was specifically for monsters...

Unwittingly, my steps turned timid. I came closer and closer. Yet it seemed like there was no such barrier on the road. I wasn't sure why.

Instead, there were two soldiers standing guard in front of the village entrance. They were wearing simple, matching armors with some sort of crest. I fixed my hood, making sure my ears weren't visible.

My cloak was squeaky clean thanks to Blobsy, but it was still an oversized piece of garment. The hem was all ragged and full of tears.

"Hey, you kid over there! Stop!" One of the soldiers called.

"..."

"Ain't seen that sort of look before. Not a village kid? Where'd you come from?"

"...over there," I pointed to the grassy field.

The soldier looked even more incredulous. "Suspicious. Show me your face!"

"Nah, man, no need for that. Look, if you can pay the fee, we'll let you in, alright? Just one silver."

Surprise flashed on the other guard's face, then quickly turned into a leering smirk. I was probably getting ripped off here.

"Yes."

I paid without any complaints. For a moment, the guard looked puzzled; apparently he just wanted to make a bit of trouble for me. He hesitantly looked to the other guard.

"Oh, sorry, it's actually one silver for each of us. Should have been clearer, really."

"...yes."

I gave the other guard another coin. They looked pleased with themselves, then waved me through like they were chasing away cats.

"Aight, come in quick. Don't make trouble."

"And kid, it's another two coins when you're leaving. Get it ready."

"..."

I never thought they'd be asking for bribes this shamelessly.

That was a huge expense, even if it was necessary. Well, not like I actually knew how much a silver was worth anyway.

Honestly, if I was standing guard, I wouldn't have let a shady kid hiding her face in a hood who just walked from the grassy field inside the village. In a way, them being shitty people worked out well for me.

Fixing up my appearance was my current top priority. I only came here to find information about the big cities, among other info, and to find children's clothes, otherwise I wouldn't have bothered with this sort of village that looked like it had zero interesting things going on.

I glanced to the side of the road, looking at the fields being worked only by beastman slaves. I walked on, towards an area with a few buildings packed closely together.

The atmosphere felt like the sort of shopping district you usually see in the countryside. A few people sent me looks full of suspicions. I saw a place with sheets of fabric and old clothes hanging outside and entered. Inside, the plump shopkeeper saw me and grimaced.

“This ain’t a playground, kid.”

“I want clothes,” I said, setting a few silver coins on the counter. The woman’s attitude turned a whole 180°, and she instantly put on a smile.

“My, my, children’s clothes, right? I have a few good pieces over there, honey.”

There weren’t much in variety. I picked up a few dresses and sashes.

“Do you have shoes? Leather, if possible. And a coat with a hood, too.”

“Here ya go. Boots still new, see? And this coat here, I got it from a merchant from the capital. Really popular with the girls, I hear!”

“Do you have satchels?”

“Aight, cloth or leather?”

“Leather.”

Honestly it was just my bias speaking when I picked leather. The material really gave off that ‘rugged traveler’ feel.

I also picked up some underwear and socks, then changed in the back. This coat fit me so much better. I could hide my ears while still showing my face, so I looked a lot less shady now.

I left the changing room. The shopkeeper woman took a look at my face. She seemed somewhat surprised.

“My! Honey, you look adorable! Have you finished shopping?”

“Yeah.”

“Alright. I’ll just take those coins you left on the counter, then. I’m taking a loss here, so you better be grateful, okay?”

“...”

There were a few large silver coins together with small ones. Were the large ones really so low in value? These were just secondhand clothes. I thought all the stuff I bought wouldn’t even reached 150 dollars...

I returned to the shopping district. With decent clothing, there were a

lot less suspicious gazes now, but a few of them were staring at my face, perhaps due to seeing an unfamiliar kid.

There was a street stall selling skewers of meat, with chairs to the side for customers. I started a conversation with the owner, almost as a way to run from the uncomfortable stares.

“Excuse me. How much for one of those?”

“Welcome! Small skewers are one copper each, large ones are three.”

“I want as much as I can buy with this, then.”

“Thank you for your business! One small silver it is, then. And an extra small skewer for such a cute young lady.”

I handed over the coin. The man was all smiles as he gave me three large skewers and two small ones.

So that’s 10 coppers, not counting the extra. A small silver was about 10 dollars, right? If the currency followed powers of 10, then a normal silver was 100 dollars?

...and that woman took five of those.

I thought people in the countryside were supposed to be caring and good-natured...

The owner of the stall seemed like a decent guy, so I asked him a few things, like where the large cities were. Supposedly, I could ride a horse carriage to a neighboring town half a day’s ride away, then get a stagecoach to the capital.

He told me where the town was. I gave my thanks and left the shopping district. Blopsy, still hiding inside my satchel, happily chomped on the skewers.

But then I detected a human magical signal tailing me. When I escaped into a nearby copse of tree, their walk turned into a jog and they caught up.

“Girlie, wait up.”

They turned out to be the kind man running the street stall.

“...mister stallkeeper? Did you need something?”

“Yeah, I mean, I noticed, you know? I saw them peeking out earlier.”

He smiled wryly, scratching his head. And then he took out a wooden pestle, probably taken from his stall, and smacked it against his empty palm in an intimidating gesture.

“Girl, you’re one of those beastmen, right? Must be a canine type, then, by the looks of your drooping ears? Come now, you stinky demihumans aren’t supposed to be coming into human lands, didn’t you know that? I’ll sell you to a nice place, so behave yourself and come with me, okay?”

“...”

What the hell do you mean, ‘okay’? I thought the attitude was limited to the slave hunters only, but even normal human citizens were like this? And the man didn’t even seem to be thinking he was doing something wrong. He reached out his hand to me, with the same kind of nonchalance as a hunter would have when they shot a rabbit just because they saw an easy prey.

I sighed, exasperated. This was so far beyond my expectations. Weren’t they supposed to be real, living people, not NPCs programmed with cruelty?

Answering the man’s beckoning, I also reached out my right hand...

“Gakkh!?”

And returned it to mist, which then proceeded to invade his mouth, filling his lungs and stopping his breathing. I drained him dry from the inside.

‘Hey, Blobby. Some more snack for you.’

boing

Chapter 22 DEMIHUMAN SLAVES

Dealing with the stallkeeper was easier than I thought. The mental aspect of it, not the physical method.

I expected hesitation, even for me. They weren't NPCs in a game, they were real living people. In the end, I didn't really feel anything.

Had the past month twist me so much? Or had I fully adopt the mindset of a monster? At any rate, all life, to me, was separated into three neat boxes: allies, enemies, and the uninvolved. I could not see the world in any other way.

Well, it's too late for contemplation now. I'd already killed bandits and merchants, after all.

[Shedy] [Race: Mistral] [Lesser Demon (Low-Rank)]

☐The demon of bewitching mist that dances upon the northern seas. A canny spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 752/755] 5↑

[Total Combat Power: 830/830] 5↑

[Unique Skill: <Reroll> <Cyber-Manipulation>]

[Racial Skill: Fear]

[Simple Identification] [Humanoid Form (Adept)] [Expert Packer]

I had Blobsy dispose of the corpse before people could discover him and raise a fuss. I exited the thicket and went back to the road, looking as innocent as an angel.

If I took him to be the standard for non-combatant citizens, I was quite sure I could massacre a hundred of them without any problems. But there was no guarantee all humans were similarly terrible. And I didn't even have the spare time to be going around killing anyway.

Twenty-six days of borrowed time left.

I needed to find the two other magic stones and reach the World Tree

by then.

So anyway, I didn't expect my ears to be exposed so easily.

It's true that I still hadn't gotten used to having a human body yet, but was I really that eye-catching? Back on Earth, I used to get curious looks all the time for being albinic. However, people in this world had more than just black, blond, or brown hair – there were silver, deep-blue, scarlet, and many other colors too. I didn't think I would stand out here.

The form I was currently taking was the image of myself that I had. Except I didn't look emaciated and full of bruises. I was looking completely healthy for my age, so there's even less of a reason for people to take notice.

I wondered why I was different from my memory of how I used to look like. Perhaps I had subconsciously 'optimized'

myself?

And the results of the optimization included rabbit ears...? And I didn't just have the ears. I only realized when changing in the second-hand clothing store that I also had a rabbit's tail, around the size of a human fist, above my butt.

Why. Why were the ears and tail necessary???

Well, what's done is done. I'd just have to hide the ears with my coat's hood.

I still had around 10 silvers and a few small silvers taken from the bandits. I'd really prefer to have some more funds, though... that shopkeeper woman and the guards really put a dent to my wallet.

They'll get what's coming to them sooner or later.

It was getting late, but I had no intention to rent a room in a village that treated every outsiders as bags of coins. Even if the innkeeper looked like a nice person, if they saw my rabbit ears, they might still decide to barge into my room at midnight with a stick.

So I hid myself in one of the thickets dotting the village. Once night came, I stealthily moved towards the fields.

Here, unlike Earth's polluted night sky, the stars alone were plenty bright enough to light my way. Well, it wasn't like I actually needed the light to be able to see.

I transformed into a quasi-misty human shape to not leave behind any footsteps, and floated towards a small shack adjacent to the fields. There were around 10 people inside, judging from the magical signals.

The shack – it was closer to a storage room, really – wasn't locked. The door looked like it would break from a single swing of a handaxe anyway. I peeked through the gap and saw only men. Demihumans, from early teens all the way until around fifty-years old.

There was no floor, only hardened dirt. I saw what looked like straw-beds in the back. Everyone looked hygienic enough, but they were only wearing some shabby work clothes. They were sitting around a small fire set in the center of the storage room, tiredly waiting for the pot of vegetables to finish cooking.

Besides the walls and roofs, this was no different from camping in the wilds.

Six canine beastmen, three felines, one elf. All of them were below 100 in power, though that still probably made them stronger than the human villagers.

I opened the door and stepped inside. Around half of them instantly noticed. They looked up.

“...who are you? What does a kid like you want with us?” A beastman sitting by the fireside asked, looking tired but cautious. He looked closer to a wolf than a dog. “We may be slaves, but we're not toys for you kids to play with even into the night...”

“That's not why I'm here.”

I took off my hood. The group of beastman gasped as they saw my drooping ears.

“You're a canine-type... no. A rabbit? I've never heard of that beastman race before.”

The wolf beastman looked over to the elven man, who frowned and shook his head.

“Neither have I. Although... I had heard that during my grandfather’s time, there lived more than just the current canine and feline beastman races. However, these other races had all been hunted down to be pets for the humans. They were supposed to have already gone extinct a few hundred years ago.”

“There were survivors...?”

They looked at me with skeptical eyes. I shook my head.

“I don’t know *what* I am. All I knew was that all my *fellows* had died. I’d been hiding myself on my journey until now.”

“I see... You must’ve had a rough time too, girl.”

“Don’t mind me. I just have a few things I wanted to ask.”

I told them the humans stole something from me, and that I was on a journey to get it back. Then I asked them about the barrier around this village and about the bigger cities.

“I think the barrier came from the magitool to repel monsters that was in the mayor’s house... As for the cities, you better not go, young lady. With looks like that, plus how rare your race is, you’re going to get enslaved right off the bat. Those damn bastards think that *anything* not human were their livestock.”

“Why didn’t you run?”

A feline beastman, who’ve been quietly listening until now, scowled in self-derision. He spat out words like they were poison.

“Don’t you see these collars, girlie? As long as they were still on our necks, they would choke us once we get too far from the mayor’s magitool. The women were taken somewhere else... even my daughter caught the mayor’s eyes. I didn’t know where he took her. We’re fated to work here until our deaths...”

“Are you giving up?”

“Watch your mouth, girl! What do you know?!”

I moved to his back in a flash, before the outraged feline could stand up. My dagger touched his neck.

“You...”

The feline beastman was shocked still. As the wolf beastman glared daggers at me, I threw the dagger I was holding to his feet.

“...what do you want?”

“For you. If you’re tired of living, why not kill yourself? Faster that way.”

All their breathing hitched. I could see anger simmering in their eyes.

Unconcerned, I dropped a few more daggers at their feet, then turned my back on them and walked toward the door.

“Wait, girl!”

“I’m going to a human city. Maybe after I break a few of the mayor’s toys. Those are for you. Whether you use them to die or to *live*, that’s up to you.”

Even after I left the storage room, none of them were moving. None of them so much as said a word.

I headed toward the large mansion that seemed to be the mayor’s house, where I had detected a rather strong magical signal during the morning. There were no guards. Perhaps these people had absolute trust on the monster repellant magitool. However, as I infiltrated under the cover of darkness, I did encounter a few floating ‘fireflies’. I crushed them all, just in case.

According to No. 01’s information, these firefly-looking things were the corporation’s observation drones. The drones’

design emphasized stealth, so even wild birds could break them. Me destroying them here wouldn’t be a problem. I would have liked to get some intel from the drones, but as of the moment, my power wasn’t enough to do it.

I walked directly to the front doors. I dispersed my right arm, moving the mist through the cracks, then re-solidify to unlock the bolt from the inside.

The mayor’s mansion was incredibly bright, despite the fact that this world was supposed to be similar to Earth’s medieval ages. There were

magical lights all over the place. I saw a few other magitools that looked like modern electrical appliances, too.

There were no fireplaces, yet the place still felt somewhat warm. Were there air conditioners, too?

The lights were on, yet no one was around. A closer look revealed a note on a table. According to it, the mayor's wife had gone drinking in the shopping district and wouldn't be back until morning.

This village was being pretty extravagant in using mana, I see...

The magical signal I detected was under me. I scoured the mansion to find a path down. As I descended the stairs, I heard the whimpering of a girl, together with a man's chuckles.

“Heheheh, come now, we're only getting started.”

“No...”

A middle-aged man was whipping a young beastman girl with what looked to be a riding crop, his other hand holding a bottle of alcohol. The girl was curling up, sobbing in pain.

Deeper into the room, I saw an altar emanating magic. As I approached, the drunken man – the mayor, most likely –

realized my presence.

“What, just a little beastman girl? Come clos-urgk!”

Oh, right, my hood was still down.

I repeated my mist-hand-into-lungs trick again, making sure to drain him dry to his soul. He writhed, his face deathly pale, his hands scrabbling to tear out his throat. Finally, the mummy collapsed.

Seeing his death, the girl squeaked. I ignored her and took a nearby handaxe to smash apart all the magitools on the altar.

The room felt so much cleaner now.

The mansion's lights were off. I wonder why? I wasn't paying attention when they started getting shut down.

“E-Excuse me...”

The girl hesitantly called after me. She still seemed to be seeing well enough in the dark room. I paid no attention to her, moving up the stairs to exit the mansion.

The faint magical pressure that I could feel everywhere in the village was flickering. It probably wouldn't take more than a few days before monsters started attacking this place.

Not like I had the time to worry about those beastmen, anyway.

On a closer look, the house lights dotting the village were all gone, too. Screams sounded out here and there. Maybe there was a fuse-box analogue among the tools on the altar?

I wasn't sure whether the altar had the magitool monitoring the slave collars or not, and I had no intention of verifying that, either. With the village in chaos, I disappeared into the darkness, seeking the neighboring town that had the stagecoach to the capital.

boing

‘Ah, sorry, Blobsy. No snacks for you this time.’

Chapter 23 A CURIOUS MEETING

Twenty-four days of borrowed time left.

Now I could move as fast as a predatory carnivore if I flew in my quasi-mist humanoid form, even over long distance. It still took me more than a whole day to reach the town with a stagecoach ride to the capital.

Now the problem was, could I enter the town without any trouble? There was the usual barrier around the town. I could only get in through the main road and gate.

From what I could see of it from afar, it looked quite developed. There was a train line running through it.

Then the train must go to the capital too, right? That's how it goes, normally. I wonder why the villagers said a

'stagecoach' instead? I'd probably understand once I got in. The thing is, this was a decently large town. The gate guards here were a lot more thorough, even checking everyone's faces.

Just my face would be fine. It'd be a much bigger problem if they told me to remove my hood. They might even bring out the pitchforks right on the spot.

...would simply flying by myself actually be faster than a carriage ride? As I continued walking in contemplation, I noticed a man holding a blood-soaked lump of flesh by the roadside.

He looked... creepy. Scratch that, he looked outright dangerous.

The lump of flesh dripping blood in his left hand was a head, horned and savage-looking. He was calling at all the horse carriages and travelers passing by. With how menacing he looked, it was no surprise all of them either took a detour or sped up to avoid him.

[Dangerous Man] **[Race:** Human

] **[Adventurer?]**

[Magic Points (MP): 142/150] **[Hit Points (HP): 200/200]**

[Total Combat Power: 787]

Strong! Pretty much equal to me. So there *were* humans this powerful...

Who was he? He looked like trouble, so I pulled up my hood and tried my best to pass by him without attracting his attention. It didn't work.

"Hey you, the little girl... Yes, I'm talking to you, stop ignoring me."

"...what is it?"

He looked in his mid-twenties. Short flaming-red hair, scarlet eyes. Handsome face, if you ignore the cocky smile full of teeth. Generally just an all-around good-looking man.

His clothes seemed to be quite expensive originally, but the hardened blood splatters had already turned it black.

Honestly, he stank.

"Wat iz it?"

"You already said that! And why are you pinching your nose this time?! How terribly rude."

"Okay. Again, what?"

Annoyed, but also realizing the conversation was going nowhere, the man held the head to me.

"Buy this. It's an ogre head. One silver's fine."

"...wha?"

He was telling me to buy the ogre head? Why? I tilted my head, fingers still pinching my nose. His mood got even worse.

"Come on, girl, that's an ogre! O-G-R-E! Just bring it to the adventurer's guild! You can get one whole small gold coin for selling the horn plus the bounty reward!"

"Hy don't yu go dere yourselph?"

"Stop pinching your nose already... Sure I want to, but unluckily, my companion was keeping all my identification and money. I can only

meet up with them inside the town. You see the problem.”

So basically, people entering the town needed to have either an identification card or the money to pay the fee. He didn't have either, so he was trying to get a silver coin by selling the ogre head to passers-by.

He was probably from a well-off family. Quite irresponsible, though.

“Why did you split up with them?”

“We came from Touze Empire for the auction. I thought I had some spare time so I went hunting a little bit, then I saw this ogre. Pretty much just jumped off the horse and hunted it down on a spur-of-the-moment thing. Didn't think it'd lead me on a merry chase for that long. Whoops!” He laughed boisterously.

I really sympathized with whoever was with him...

“So the entrance fee is one silver coin?”

“What, you didn't know? The silver's the fee to make a temporary identity card. If you make an official one later on, you can get that silver refunded.”

“Hmm...”

“So girl, buy the head for me.”

“Let's see... How about I lend you a silver, and you help me get inside the town?”

A lone kid would be suspicious, but perhaps not as much if I was with an adult. The man ruminated for a bit, then immediately nodded.

“Not sure what you're thinking, but fine. If anything happens, it'd be this country's problem, not mine. Alright, little girl, I accept.”

“Then we have a deal. Here, two silvers, pay the fee for both of us. Also, Blobsy.”

boing

“Oh? Hohoh? Isn’t that a Jelly Slime? You sure have a rare pet there.”

Apparently she was a rarely seen monster. The man stared with great interest.

Blobsy jumped out from my satchel. According to my will, she clung to the man’s clothes and cleaned off the dirt and blood splatters.

“Oh man, that’s hella convenient. I heard people said you wouldn’t ever have any trash in your mansion if you could have one of these. Better hide it well, little girl.”

“Shedy.”

“Mm?”

“I’m not ‘girl’, nor am I ‘you’. My name’s Shedy.”

I didn’t really need to tell him this, but honestly getting called ‘you’ and ‘girl’ all the time was getting a little annoying.

“I see. Right then, Shedy, I shall deign to allow you to call me Tiz.”

“...”

I felt like this was going to be so much trouble later on.

“...also, lend me that ogre head. I’ll store it until we get in.”

“Oooh, are you a Packer then? You’re a surprisingly convenient girl, Shedy.”

“Packer?”

According to him, once in a blue moon there would be someone born with a mysterious power, like increased physical strength or water breathing, for example.

These people were considering to be divinely blessed. The Children of God. Among them existed people with the power to store more items than normal into the bags or satchels that they used, and they were called Packers.

“I see. Packers do tend to be misunderstood. I’m a Child of God too, I understand how it feel to be the target of envy.”

Apparently, shop owners who didn't know how it worked were often afraid that the power would make it easier for Packers to shoplift, when in fact they could only expand their bag capacity. They couldn't make the items disappear into thin air.

I could, though. I was storing the items inside my body, after all.

"By the way, my power is the Blessing of Fire. The fire I create would be stronger, and I would be unharmed by any and all flames."

"Is that so..."

So there were special people like us secret alpha testers in the new world, too.

Not long after, I and the good-for-nothing adult named Tiz got past the town gates.

The gate guards took a few glances at me, but once the decently-dressed noble-looking Tiz said "She's with me," they let us through without further questions.

Appearances really are important.

"By the way, you said there's an auction? What are you going to buy?"

"Yeah, there is. I heard the adventurers brought a yellow magic stone that looked like a precious jewel. If I set it in a magic sword, maybe I can get a special power out of it."

"I see..."

Looked like coming here was the right decision.

"Well then, thank you, Tiz. Here, your ogre head."

"Wait up. Don't take it out here, it's going to get me filthy again. Besides, I'm not in the habit of receiving free favors from women and children. Come with me, I'll repay you that money."

"...where are we going?"

"The adventurer's guild, obviously."

...what?

Tiz pretty much just grabbed me by the arm and dragged me all the way to the building. This was the first time in my life visiting a town in another world, and I didn't even have the time for sightseeing. The streets I saw when I was being dragged looked a lot like old-time Western Europe.

The adventurer's guild was a three-stories building made of stone, rustic both outside and inside.

I wondered if I was the first ever monster to enter the guild hall...

"Shedy, take out the ogre head."

"...got it."

I pretended to take the head out from my satchel. Tiz started up some sort of negotiation with the receptionist lady. I moved to a corner, trying to stay unnoticed.

It was morning. There were a few groups of adventurers looking at requests, chatting, or talking with the guild staff.

To deal with the increase of the monster population, the world's powers had agreed to the founding of 'an organization to represent personal mercenaries'. In other words, the adventurer's guild. Before, bands of mercenaries would have to negotiate directly with nobles or merchants for work, a function which the guild had now taken over.

...to say the truth, this guild hall was *problematic*.

Adventurers were monster specialists. They were decently powerful. A quick glance didn't show me any probable beta players. However, there were some people over 300 combat power among the capable-looking ones.

Now, the problem wasn't that they had high combat power. The problem was that even the people who looked rather strong *only* had around 300 combat power.

Within this world existed a method to discern the opponent's magic and combat power. **[Identification]**

And my magic and power were far above the adventurers.

[Shedy] [Race: Mistral] [Lesser Demon (Low-Rank)]

☐The demon of bewitching mist that dances upon the northern seas. A canny spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 760/760] 5↑

[Total Combat Power: 836/836] 6↑

[Unique Skill: <Reroll> <Cyber-Manipulation>]

[Racial Skill: Fear]

[Simple Identification] [Humanoid Form (Adept)] [Expert Packer]

I was careless. I thought there were plenty of people as strong as Tiz. In hindsight, maybe he was extra-powerful due to his special power. And even he only had 150 magic. The amount of magic I had wasn't just anomalous, it was outright abnormal in comparison.

That was why I'd been hiding out in a corner, trying not to draw attention to myself...

"Shedy, come here!"

And then Tiz shouted my name. Damn it, what the hell was he doing?!

A few adventurers turned around. He might just shout me out again if I ignored him, so I quietly headed toward the counter he was at.

"You're slow."

"...what do you want?" I replied sullenly.

He looked at me as if I was an idiot and said, sounding like it was the most obvious thing in the world, "To register you, what else?"

"...what?"

Bewildering. I honestly didn't understand what he was saying.

Tiz just grinned, "I just re-registered too. Apparently you don't need an identity card, you just need to have enough combat power to do it. You do it too. Just place your hand on this crystal."

Seriously, what sort of crap is he forcing on me here?! Damn you...

The large crystal was still showing Tiz's magic and combat power in shining numbers. As I unwittingly moved away, Tiz grabbed and forcefully put my hand on the crystal.

"I don't need to register."

"Just do it already. It's going to be really troublesome for you if you don't have an identity card."

Crap, no no nononono...

[Reroll] [Reroll] [Reroll] [Reroll] [Reroll] [Reroll] [Reroll]
[Reroll] [Reroll] [Reroll] [Reroll] [Reroll] [Reroll]

[Reroll] [Reroll] [Reroll] —

[Magic Points: 120]

[Total Combat Power: 196]

"Wow, you're quite strong."

"...thank you."

Thank god the crystal only displayed my current numbers...

I frantically used my unique skill to reduce my magic. Some adventurers spilled their drinks, some tripped, some had the back of the chairs they were leaning on suddenly broke, some staff members spilled ink on their documents. Screams broke out all around me.

I acquired an adventurer's registration card without further trouble. Tiz handed me half of the ogre's reward and material sale. I got five silver coins. He paid the registration fee for me too. I wasn't going to bother saying thanks.

"...bye."

"Thanks for the help, Shedy. Come again in a few years once you've grown into a beauty. I'll make you mine!" He guffawed with gusto.

Who the hell would date you? And you didn't even say who or where you were.

...how exhausting. In many ways, at that.

Looked like there weren't many who could use **[Identification]** . A 10-uses crystal already costed three silvers, when you have to do it nearly a hundred times to learn the skill.

And I heard that even when you learned the skill, if you belonged to the human race which had weak sensory organs, you'd still consume quite a bit of magic. Normal adventurers had to be economical with their skill, also using the crystal once in a while. No one would waste their magic and money in haphazard identifications. Perhaps the 1-point mana cost was only due to me being a monster.

I really needed a way to hide my monster status better...

After a while, I finally found my destination: the stagecoach. I talked to the bored-looking middle-aged driver.

"Excuse me, how much for a ride to the capital?"

"The capital, eh? It'll be 5 silvers, and we leave in three days. If the weather's nice, maybe we'll arrive in five days."

"I see. Thanks..."

I buried my shock to say my courtesies, then left.

I could handle the price one way or another, but three days plus another five... too much of a waste of time.

I began to really consider just flying there. However, this was a five-days journey on a horse carriage. I could all too easily get lost.

So I checked out the train. Lucky for me, there was one train heading to the capital that started running tonight, and it would take only a day. That's really fast.

But the ticket was 5 small golds.

Let's see... currency followed powers of 10, so ten times a silver? 5,000 dollars? You gotta be kidding me.

I only had around 10 silvers on hand. Even if I headed out right now

to find and ‘confiscate’ some bandits’ treasury, it’d take more than a day.

...alright, smuggling it is.

As I began looking for ways to sneak myself onboard, I heard a man’s voice from behind me, speaking almost in a whisper.

“Hey, young lady. You want on that train, right? I know a way.”

Author’s Note: Quick explanation of identification, skills, and Children of God Among normal citizens, almost no one could use identification as a skill. Only some merchants could. And learning the skill wasn’t without drawbacks; the human race with their low perception would have to consume 10 magic for each use.

Even adventurers would only use the skill in critical situations.

Most people with a need to identify still buy and use crystals, instead.

The reason for the low number of people who could use the skill wasn’t just due to the cost, it was also due to the fact that there weren’t that many crystals on the market in the first place.

The Temples, in order to keep the price of the crystals stable for the adventurers’ benefit, were limiting the amount of available crystals. Thus, demand was always high.

Skills were generally acquired after training. Humanity in Yggdrasia weren’t even aware that Skills have different levels.

Then how were Ranks decided? With each rise in level of the combat skill, a person could learn and use one more Combat Art. This number of learnable Arts decided Ranks. Players learned Arts automatically.

In self-identification, the only people who could see the general skills they possessed were players.

The special abilities of the Children of God were different from Skills. It was said that the abilities came to be due to the influence of mana. Only one in a thousand was born with these abilities.

Perhaps the secret alpha testers’ special abilities also came from the mana leaking from Yggdrasia into Earth.

Chapter 24 EXPRESS TRAIN

“Hey, young lady. You want on that train, right? I know a way.”

I turned to the voice. It was a lanky man, around thirty years old. His clothes would make him look like a perfectly normal citizen, if you ignored the shady eyes and shifty mannerisms. Honestly, he was terribly suspicious.

“...what?”

“Come now, no need to be so cautious. And don’t raise your voice. It’s obvious the ticket price’s giving you trouble, right? Then I’ve got just the thing...”

The man moved closer and whispered in a barely audible voice.

“Tell me, how much can you pay?”

“...eight silvers,” I replied honestly.

The man scowled, looking obviously disappointed. “Hmmm... not quite enough, but it’s leaving tonight anyway. Fine, then. Come with me. Coincidentally, we have a free spot tonight. No guarantees of comfort, though.”

I just nodded. The man merrily walked off, and I followed.

He might as well be having bright neon signs above his head saying ‘illegal dealings here’. Normally you’d think maybe he was the type of smuggler who snuck people into the cargo room, but upon closer consideration, something felt not quite right.

The capital was far away, but it only took five days by coach. The train might be able to get there in a single day without delays and without risking bandits, but I didn’t think there was that much demand for this sort of passenger smuggling.

The only people with that sort of need were probably wanted fugitives or refugees.

It was shady as all hell. But in my case, I had a good reason for

following him.

We left the dazzling train station behind, following the rails. I saw less and less people. Houses began to be replaced by shelters made from dirt and mud. Perhaps the noise and vibration of the train had driven down the land price here.

We entered a large storehouse by the railway. There were some ten-plus humans checking on some sort of wooden crates, plus a few beastman slaves carrying a large crate.

The man shouted toward the back of the room. "Chairman! One last 'passenger' here!"

"Hey, good job!" A deep voice answered. It belonged to a wide-set man full of muscle, looking to be around fifty. He totally looked like a boss of a bandit gang under disguise.

The boss examined me from head to toe. He smirked, "Hell, didn't expect this from you! You got us a fine one!"

"Heheh!" The lanky man creepily chuckled.

"Slaves! Get the cargo outside to the station! Girl, you go this way."

"..."

At this point, I didn't think there was going to be a twist revealing these men to actually be good people. I still quietly followed the so-called chairman. We stopped in front of a large crate.

"You'll stay in here."

Another man to the side of the crate opened the lid. I saw only little girls inside, both human and beastman. There were around ten of them packed closely together. All pretty, and looking like they were *carefully chosen*.

Some were sobbing. Some with blank faces, already resigning themselves to their fates. Some were cowering in fear...

"Hey... they didn't look like *passengers* to me." I muttered.

The chairman puffed out a chortle, which then turned into full-blown guffawing. "Is that so? Sorry to disappoint you, then. They're actually getting pretty good treatment here. They're still presents for the

nobles in the capital, after all.”

Then he gave an order, his hands busy taking out a cigar, “You two, collect our newest passenger’s fare and get her in!”

“Got it.” The lanky man and another man sniggered. Their hands reached toward me.

...well, this was pretty much within expectations.

“Alright, give us all you-urk!” “Wha-aghk!”

I turned both my arms into mist, filling up their lungs and absorbed their life.

As I thought, my combat power was still too low to drain them dry in an instant. I’d only recovered ten percent of my magic.

“Come on, what’s taking you two so long...”

Their groaning prompted the chairman to turn around, and he was greeted with the sight of his men rapidly turning into standing mummies. The cigar, just lit, dropped out of his wide-open mouth.

“Wha...”

[Shedy] [Race: Mistral] [Lesser Demon (Low-Rank)]

[Magic Points: 206/776] 16↑

[Total Combat Power: 282/853] 17↑

I knew this already, but humans were really so much more efficient. I totally understood the feelings of those monsters that attacked humans as soon as they saw them, now.

And it wasn’t like I’d go on a human-murdering spree, anyway. Finding these kind of garbage-of-society people to kill was a rare occasion for me.

I kept my arms misty, throwing a smile full of gratitude to the chairman. His face twitched. He shouted.

“All you lot, come here! This damn brat’s a freak!!”

Answering the call, around five of his underlings ran inside from the entrance. Perhaps the rest were getting weapons?

“What’s wrong, chairman?!” “This is the brat?!”

Were they just underestimating me because I was a kid, or were they that loyal to their boss? The men came with only their bare hands or at most, small knives as weapons.

Their power were around 100. I supposed they were men used to violence at least, and I didn’t even have 300 in power at the moment. Still, they had no effective weapons. I would never lose.

“What the fuck is this shi-aargk...”

I choked one of them within bindings of mist. He collapsed like a dry, rotten tree branch. Fear of the unknown pushed the other four back a few steps.

Bang! Together with a ringing explosion, I felt something pierce through my stomach.

“H-Hahahah... you’re dead, freak!”

The chairman was aiming a curved tube in his hand at me. It looked like a pistol from older days.

“Here’s our chance! Everyone, get her!” He commanded. The men suppressed their fear, looked at each other, then nodded. They approached.

I turned my right arm tangible again, then took out one of the remaining daggers I had to slice the neck of the leading man. He went down in gurgles. The other three men were advancing without much care, so I quasi-mistified into a larger, adult-sized form and drained them dry in an instant.

“A monster...?”

Apparently the chairman had been under the impression that turning my arms into mist was just a special ability, much like those of the Children of God. Until now, he still thought I was a ‘human’.

Had I been one, his shot back then would have been truly fatal. Even with my body of mist, it still hurt quite a bit due to the high density I

had in my humanoid form. I only just recovered my magic again, and already he made me waste a part of it.

[Shedy] [Race: Mistral] [Lesser Demon (Low-Rank)]

[Magic Points: 226/816] 40↑

[Total Combat Power: 307/897] 44↑

“Chairman!”

I felt over ten people approaching from the entrance in my radar. Reinforcements with weapons, perhaps.

Well then... time to get serious.

I returned to complete mist, pouring myself out of my clothes and swelling up into a menacing cloud. In a corner of my vision, I saw the chairman’s legs giving out. He **[Fear]** ed me.

*

There was one thing I realized from the battles I’d had until now: I gained more magic from absorbing people who were thinking about bad things. And I could recover more magic from people who **[Fear]** ed the sight of me.

Which was why I fought in my true appearance, except... I forgot about the kids.

What a blunder. Poor kids, some of them even pissed themselves in terror. I really shouldn’t be leaving witnesses alive, but, well...

“Don’t tell anyone, alright? Or else...”

...I’ll eat you.

They seemed to have understood the three words I left unsaid when they saw my smile. All of them frantically nodded with tearful eyes. Blobsy snacked on all the corpses anyway, so I didn’t think anyone would believe the kids right away if they still decided to talk.

They could find their ways back home by themselves, right? I did feel pity for the demihuman kids, but I wasn’t obliged to save everyone, nor did I have the leeway.

So anyway, I visited the human traffickers' office room to borrow a bit of money. I found 3 large gold coins and 5 small golds. This was plenty enough for an express train ticket.

I came back to the station, my mood buoyant. Waiting for me there was a shocking discovery.

“Wait, you’re sold out?”

Tickets to the capital were sold out. Who the hell would splurge that much on a ticket?!

According to the young man manning the ticketing office, the train had five cars. The first one was the locomotive, so there were four cars available.

One of those was for freight, another one for dining. People could ride on the remaining two, but these cars weren’t the type that had rows upon rows of seats like I imagined. Instead, they had private rooms with a capacity of six, and each car had four such rooms. There were only eight rooms in total.

The only people who’d pay so much for a ride were the nobles or the affluent, so generally these rooms weren’t shared.

Paying for a whole room meant paying for six, but they had money. They didn’t care.

“This time around, there was some big-shot from another country. They rented out a whole car. So actually we were already out of tickets since yesterday... By the way, if you don’t have an inn room yet, how about coming to my place?”

“No thanks.”

And here I was, thinking he was surprisingly friendly...

It looked like the people here didn’t care as much about age as people on Earth, only looks and physique. In town, I even saw a man over thirty linking arms with a teenager.

Well, even with that difference, my body was still only that of a kid’s anyway.

That aside, what to do about the train ride...

Fine then, I guess I was smuggling myself aboard. In the end, I went back to my original plan. But now that I knew there was space for trafficking kids in the freight car, I had my way in.

If I remembered correctly, a day in this world was around the same as Earth. I saw a brand-new clock tower in the center of the town. I wondered if it was a sign of Earth culture leaking through.

The train would leave at nine o'clock tonight. People were getting aboard after having their dinner in town. I blended into the darkness and entered through the freight car's window, just before the train set off.

As I was, I *could* just cling on top of the train, but there was a reason why I wanted to secure a relatively safe space.

[Shedy] **[Race: Mistral]** **[Lesser Demon (Low-Rank)]**

☐The demon of bewitching mist that dances upon the northern seas. A canny spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 565/935] 119↑

[Total Combat Power: 658/1028] 131↑

[Unique Skill: <Reroll> <Cyber-Manipulation>]

[Racial Skill: Fear]

[Simple Identification] **[Humanoid Form (Adept)]** **[Expert Packer]**

[Class Rank-up Available]

I didn't know if it was because my magic broke 900, or because my combat power broke 1000. All I knew was that I could rank-up again.

It said 'class', so my race wasn't changing, right? I didn't think there'd be a problem. Still, this was my first rank-up ever since I escaped the System.

Whenever I evolved, the process always finished before I could understand what was going on. All the same, I believed it was better to keep a clear image of what I wanted to be in my mind.

Alright... *I wanted to be stronger while keeping my body of mist... if possible, I wanted to be strong enough for my human form to be combat-viable, too.*



I kept repeating those words in my head, like a mantra, in an attempt to carve them deep into my mind. I sat with knees hugged in a corner of the cargo room. And before I knew it, my consciousness sank into slumber.

.....

.....

.....

...

“Hey, Shedy. Wake up!”

...bwah?

Author’s Note: The red line’s Shedy’s journey in this world. Might be difficult to see, though. From this view, it really looks like she hasn’t moved much.

Translator’s Note: Larger version [here](#). I was hard-translating the text in anyway, so I took the occasion to fix the author’s typo too.

Chapter 25 THROUGH THE TRAIN WINDOW OF ANOTHER WORLD

I thought I didn't need to sleep any more. I wondered if it was because I was shapeshifting or because I was Ranking Up, but I saw dreams of *those days* again, after such a long time.

Really, I thought it was time I got over them already...

.....

"Hey, Shedy. Wake up!"

...bwah? My consciousness awakened in a hurry. Information of the outside world flooded into my head.

"...why are you here?"

"That's my line."

I still had my hood on. My ears should still be hidden for the time being.

I stayed seated, knees still hugged, and looked up. Within the clattering freight car, I saw Tiz standing there as if he owned the whole world, looking down at me. The pompous man was wearing clothes much fancier than what he had on when we first parted.

Standing behind and to his left was a silver-haired old man in butler clothing. He was holding a lantern, his eyes gazing sharply at me.

Behind and to Tiz's right was a woman in knight uniform with black hair in a ponytail, looking in her twenties. A sword radiating faint magical light was in her hand. She held it in an alert stance, her eyes glaring with obvious hostility.

"So it seems she's truly your acquaintance, boy. Who is this girl?"

"Stop it with the 'boy' already, gramps. She helped me out when I was trying to get in town. So, Shedy, why are you here? Talk."

It wasn't an interrogation, so much as it was just Tiz having fun in trying to drive me into a corner, especially as he was drawing near.

"Umm..." I started thinking about how to answer.

Then all of a sudden, the knight barged in between us. “Sir, don’t come any closer!” She turned to me, “Speak! You must be an assassin hired by some other noble, aren’t you?! If you won’t confess, perhaps some torture will-”

“Salia, cease at once! I’m talking to Shedy here. Stay out!”

Tiz’s roar was enough to drown out even the train’s clattering for a moment. The knight started and shrank back, flustered. Her face went pale. She bit her lips in discontent and glared daggers at me.

Seeing her response, Tiz scowled. He sighed, his hands scratching his head, and he turned to the butler.

“Gramps, I’ll take her to the guest room. Handle the formalities for me.”

“...understood.”

The butler simply bowed, his eyebrows raising a fraction as the only sign of his thoughts. He handed the lantern over to one of the attending knights behind him and readily left the cargo room.

“Sir, you mustn’t! We can’t trust her!”

“Salia, shut up. Shedy, come on.”

“...”

I had thought he was a noble. Apparently he was a much bigger shot than I imagined.

I didn’t know how he managed to discover my presence on the train so easily. I couldn’t continue to stay in this room anyway, so I quietly stood up and followed him.

As we got out of the freight car, I realized it was morning already.

It felt like it’d been a long time since I’d seen the light. As I squinted my eyes, the annoying knight woman behind me moved just a step closer. She was grinding her teeth and glaring at me, her sword still unsheathed. She whispered.

“Don’t think you’ve won, little bitch...”

“...”

[Reroll]

“Eeek!”

She lost her balance in the shaking train, but managed to put her hand on the wall and stabilized herself before she could fall... huh, so she rode that out. Well, whatever. Doing this was a waste of magic in the first place.

The knight woman... Salia, right? Her face turned scarlet from the near-miss. She finally seemed to have realized the danger of leaving her sword out and sheathed it, her foot stamping at the mark that the tip of the blade left on the train floor, trying to hide it. Let's tattle to the conductor later.

The freight car was at the tail end of the train, and apparently Tiz's group was riding the car right in front of it. I saw knights and maids attending as pairs, bowing to Tiz as he walked through the corridor. Looked like he was exactly the

‘other country's noble’ that I heard about.

One car was for 24 people. Each person's ticket fare was 5 small golds. So renting out a whole car would cost 12 large gold coins...

Spending 24 large gold coins for a round trip ticket to go hunting just because he was bored. What deep pockets Tiz had.

Other than the guest room, I even saw doors leading to what looked like the toilet and the shower. This sort of train ride was a first for me.

Tiz kept on going and entered the guest room, right around the middle of the car. I followed behind him. Salia went in last, then stood in front of the door. The room was approximately 14 square meters. The butler back then was already there, preparing tea.

“Shedy, sit in front of me.”

“Yeah.”

My casual reply earned me another scathing wave of bloodlust from Salia.

Tiz sat on the single sofa chair in the corner of the room. I moved to sit on the three-seater sofa opposite him. Just as I did, the butler started pouring tea for the two of us.

“Come on, talk.”

“First off, how did you know I was there?”

“I did! God had granted me the ability of Presence Detection to prevent danger from coming upon my lord!” Salia cut in, still not yet learning her lesson.

So that meant she was a Child of God, too? That was how she found me? Okay, I understood that part, but then why did Tiz come? Don’t you normally call the train conductor if you think you’ve found something suspicious?

Turned out Children of God were surprisingly common. Or maybe their abilities were exactly what brought them to serving nobles.

But enough of my musings. Tiz’s face was already starting to look veiny from her repeated interruptions.

The butler attempted to cool things down. “Ahem. Lady Salia, our young lord is still speaking.”

“M-My apologies...”

“I wanted to see the auction in the capital.” Things weren’t going anywhere, so I admitted my motive. Tiz looked triumphant for a moment, which immediately changed into disbelief as he leaned back on the sofa.

“What, so you wanted to see the auction so much you snuck on the train to get my help?”

“Eh? Why?”

“I told you I’m going to the auction too, didn’t I?”

“I didn’t know you were on this train, Tiz.”

“Cease your lies! You’re obviously here to cheat money out of my lord by using his generous compassion! Filthy plebeian, what other trickery-”

“I have money.”

I tapped a large gold coin on the table to shut up Salia’s yapping, attracting everyone’s sight. “I was going to buy a ticket, but then I found out *some noble* had already rented out the whole car.”

I stared at Tiz in protest. He simply looked amused, and his cocky attitude rose another notch.

“That’s not a problem, then. Gramps, sell one of the car’s seats to Shedy here. That makes you an official passenger now.

Be grateful.”

“...”

Problem solved, but I wondered why I didn’t feel even a bit of gratitude...

“Boy, that’s fine and all... but why are you helping her? It’s true your return was a fortunate happening. However, had you not repay her already?”

Salia vigorously nodded at the butler’s words. I was wondering that myself. Why was he trying to get involved with me so much?

Under the same gazes from three different people, Tiz put on a toothy, savage grin.

“Because she’ll be my girl. Why else?”

“...eh-”

“WHAAAAAAAAAT?!”

Damn it Salia, my ears. I was dumbfounded, the harpy behind me was shrieking, and the butler just rubbed his forehead in exasperation. He fixed his glare on Tiz.

“Boy, the girl’s still a kid, what in the world are you thinking... I admit, she has quite fair features, but there is no lack of beautiful women for you to choose from. What about the young lady of Count Soel?”

“The girl I got set up a meeting with? Hah, the woman just kept

demanding luxuries. I only scared her a little bit and already she was running away in tears, saying I'm 'terrible' or something."

That *was* terrible. For both of them. In many ways.

"While Shedy here doesn't even blink an eye! Very impudent, or perhaps I should say she's got guts. I like that. Gotta be less cold though, girl!"

Screw you, I don't need your opinion.

"And besides, her age isn't a problem, just give her three or four more years... hmm? Shedy, did you grow?"

"You're just imagining."

He wasn't actually imagining it. My Rank-up changed a few things about me.

[Shedy] **[Race: Mistral]** **[Lesser Demon (High-Rank)]**

☐The demon of bewitching mist that dances upon the northern seas. A canny spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 1065/1100] 165↑

[Total Combat Power: 1175/1210] 182↑

[Unique Skill: <Reroll> <Cyber-Manipulation>]

[Racial Skill: Fear]

[Simple Identification] **[Humanoid Form (Master)]** **[Specialist Packer]**

(Low-Rank) was now (High-Rank). I gained quite a bit of magic and combat power.

With **[Packer]** going from 'Expert' to 'Specialist', my storage capacity took a leap. My intuition told me that I was no longer limited to solid objects like before; I could store fluids now.

And with **[Humanoid Form]** getting from 'Adept' to 'Master', the texture and feel of my skin was now no longer distinguishable from a real human's, even when examined up close. My skin and hair looked

so smooth and glossy I felt like I just went into a beauty salon.

Next, and perhaps the most mysterious part: my body of a ten-year-old had grown another 5 centimeters, and I was no longer just a smooth, flat cylinder. I had gained just a tiny bit of a curve.

It felt like I had finally managed to return to my real age of eleven, I supposed?

“Really? Well, whatever. Your looks won’t be a problem after another two or three years anyway. Look, gramps. Even among the ladies of nobility, you almost never see skin this white.”

That’s because I was albinic.

“Honestly it made me wonder if she had blue blood underneath instead.”

I couldn’t even deny that. I was a demon, after all.

“I thought that if we can meet again a few years later, coincidentally or not, I’ll be whisking her off. I never expected our reunion to be this early. Fate must be telling me to make her mine.”

No, I hadn’t heard anything from this ‘fate’ whatever person.

Salia froze in disbelief. The butler started up his forehead-rubbing again. This time, he turned to me.

“Lady Shedy. May I hear your thoughts?”

So I noticed the butler had started to use ‘lady’ instead of just calling me ‘girl’ now. Is he giving up already? Just how indulgent was Tiz normally?

“No thanks. I’m grateful you didn’t tell on my smuggling, but I’ll go my own way once we get to the capital.”

My clear-cut refusal got Salia beaming, the butler faintly sighing, and Tiz smirking. He leaned forward.

“The auction’s two days later. Shedy, do you have the entry

qualifications?”

...qualifications?

“Trestan Kingdom’s auction is a very prominent event, on the same level as the Trading Confederation of Deulx.

Extremely stringent security. They don’t let anyone they don’t trust inside. Normal attendees would have to have lived within Trestan for at least half a year and paid 10 large golds as deposit just to get in. Do you meet even one of those conditions? You wanted to see the auction so much you snuck on the train, right? My servants would be able to get in just fine, just so you know.”

“...”

So dirty. Adults were so dirty.

“Oh, don’t worry, that’s not me hitting on you. You’re a Packer, aren’t you? You’ll just be my baggage carrier. How about it?”

If I had more leeway until the auction, I could try to steal the stone. But apparently, the security was extremely strict. And unfortunately, I didn’t have the necessary intel to sneak past the surveillance. There was one thing for certain, however: No. 17’s magic stone would be revealed upon the auction day.

Twenty-three days of borrowed time left. I wouldn’t give up.

“...understood.”

“Alright, that’s a deal. Gramps, handle her clothes! Make sure she’s fit to walk beside me!”

...I was regretting this already.

Chapter 26 THE AUCTION

“Yep, I knew it. Red looks good on you. Your white skin and hair really make those blood-red eyes pop out.” Seeing me in a complete ensemble, Tiz nodded in satisfaction.

“...thanks.” I replied tersely.

Twenty-two days of borrowed time left.

When we arrived at the station in Trestan’s capital last evening, we were greeted by over a dozen of Tiz’s subordinates and knights.

If the whole group had gone, they would’ve had to rent out the entire train. Looked like whoever handled the whole thing knew how much was too much. Which meant it must have been the butler, not Tiz.

The day after, which was today, the clothing arrived at the high-class inn we were staying at. No one had even come to measure my sizes, yet they all fit perfectly.

I was wearing a high-quality-looking white peasant blouse, with a black, knee-length pleated skirt and black leather ankle boots.

And covering all of them was a snug hooded coat in a calming dark-red shade. No matter how you slice it, I was pretty much Red Riding Hood here.

How had things come to this? I recalled the events of yesterday, when I was still on the train.

*

Tiz had gotten bored being cooped up in a train for a whole day, which meant I was in his guest room for his entertainment. Salia was still standing guard in front of the door. On papers, I was his ‘servant’, but I didn’t care to change my attitude, and Tiz hadn’t said anything about it either. Which was the last straw that pushed Salia over the edge. She snapped at me.

“How long do you plan on hiding in that rag? Show some respect. It’s sweltering just seeing you still inside that coat even indoor.”

I wholeheartedly agreed. But it wasn’t like I was wearing this because I liked it. If Tiz found out about my ears here, he’d probably burst into laughter and then promptly proceed to enslave me as his toy.

Normally if that happened, I’d just have to evaporate all the train’s passengers, but Tiz here had nearly 800 combat power.

Even silly Salia had around 400. The other knights had around 200 power too, so fighting them head-on would be quite messy. I supposed the crux would lie in how fast I could deal with Salia first...

I looked at her in my deliberations. She jolted in a bit of fright.

“W-What’s that look for?! I only spoke the tru-”

“Stop it, Salia. You too, Shedy. If it actually comes to blows, I’m not going to stop you two, but you should know she’s a magic knight. Despite what you may think, she’s quite capable.” Tiz interrupted in an attempt to mediate.

“Is that so...”

So she was more magical than martial? I supposed her weapon did have some powerful enchantment. She might prove to be a lot more troublesome to me than I first thought.

I showed no signs of wanting to make amends, and the same went for her. Then Tiz started speaking, looking like he just thought of a new game.

“That reminded me, you have quite high magic too, Shedy. And judging from your combat power, you use that magic for spellcasting, right? I didn’t think a little girl traveling alone would be weak. Perhaps there’s a secret hidden in that coat?”

He threw a sharp gaze at the part of my head I’d been hiding.

I sighed and began my prepared excuse. I pointed to his arms.

“Hmm? What do you mean by that?”

“My skin’s too white, I’m weak to light. Even this much light indoor’s

already enough to hurt my eyes.”

The lack of pigment made me quite sensitive to all sorts of light. Unlike before, it was only a trivial problem now, but the lighting in this train – were they magical too? – was about the same brightness as modern Earth’s.

“I see.”

After a few moments thinking, Tiz nodded and promptly rang the bell near his hand.

“Gramps, make sure there’s a hooded coat when you prepare her clothes. A blood-red one would be good.”

*

Was he messing with me...?

He was some sort of big-shot noble, right? Would this be within his means?

Right now, I was helping out with the preparations for tomorrow’s auction. I was managing his luggage, which was one of the responsibilities of his servants. Even if I was just one on paper.

“Shedy, can you hide weapons?”

“Weapons?”

“Yeah. The official rules said you’re not allowed weapons in. However, there’ll be incognito nobles from other countries like me at the auction, plus people from the underworld too. And you can ban weapons, but you can’t ban magic. There’ll be quite a few attendees secretly armed.”

“...as long as it’s not too big. By the way, which country’s noble are you?”

“Hah, curious? I’ll tell you if you become my servant for real.”

“Not really... just thought you’re quite young to be the... what was it... the current head, right?”

“Mmm, well... I supposed. And I’m already twenty-seven, I’m not that young anymore. It’s not an uncommon age for a family head.”

“...I really thought you were younger.”

“Is that so? ...right, I see. So there’s this thing I heard, that apparently high magic tends to make you age slower. This probably happens less often in commoner families, though. Also, kids grow up quickly, so maybe that’s why I thought you suddenly looked older.”

“Umm, yeah, must be...”

Tiz began comparing the sidearms the knights brought over. Midway through, he seemed to have gotten bored. He picked a few daggers with small magic stones inserted.

“Let’s just get whatever. Pack these, Shedy.”

...I was running out of bandit daggers, so maybe it was about time for a resupply. Well, with my Rank-up, it’s not like I needed weapons anymore anyway.

[Shedy] [Race: Mistral] [Lesser Demon (High-Rank)]

☐The demon of bewitching mist that dances upon the northern seas. A canny spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 1100/1100]

[Total Combat Power: 1210/1210]

[Unique Skill: <Reroll> <Cyber-Manipulation>]

[Racial Skill: Fear]

[Simple Identification] [Humanoid Form (Master)] [Specialist Packer]

My power hadn’t changed a bit. I hadn’t had a single fight after entering the town, after all.

And even after booking rooms in the capital’s inn, I was pretty much on light house arrest. The only exceptions were whenever Tiz got bored and called for me.

His group rented out the whole top and near-top floors, while I was given a room in the floor below those two. My room wasn't as opulent as theirs, but it was still pretty much heaven compared to the slum that was the orphanage's room packed with bunk beds.

I always had an accompanying knight to, as they said, 'watch over' me. On Salia's or the butler's orders, perhaps. Their trust did not come with Tiz's approval, it seemed.

Sure, I could disperse into mist and escape from the third-floor windows. However, I thought doing what could be done at the moment was better than simply hunting thugs at night, which would just cause a commotion and make the security even tighter than it already was.

"...and there."

Sharp, around three-centimeters claws grew from my fingertips. Their red coloring might be due to me imagining them coming from my body. This discovery came as a result of my experimentation with my mist form, and one of the things I tried was to see if the arms I created while dispersed could have sharp tips or not.

I believed these claws came to be because I had wanted a way to fight in human form when I was Ranking-up.

I said 'house arrest', but I had my hands full with important things like power experimentation and playing with Blobsy, so I didn't mind. However, whenever I came out for food or because Tiz was bored, Salia was always there to glare at me with killing intent. Irritating.

...was she jealous?

The next day, the day of the auction. Tiz's group was going to leave in the morning. With me, obviously. Tiz would still have his bodyguards until we get inside, where he would be allowed only three other accompanying people.

Those three were the bodyguard Salia, the butler, and finally, me. Salia was expressing her disagreement about my inclusion even until now, which earned her another scolding from Tiz. Then she'd glare at me again. So annoying.

The auction was held in a public hall. It looked sort of like a concert hall. I could see the royal castle from here.

“Don’t get yourself lost, Shedy.”

“Yeah.”

We headed right for one of the second-floor personal booths. Tiz sure was made of money. Right after we sat down, he started talking with the butler about their bidding plans.

“The yellow magic stone can’t be the main show.”

“Indeed. In the end, it is but an unusual magic stone. Likely, it would not be all that expensive. I believe we should focus on getting the Quarancing-made elixir instead.”

“And we don’t need the artistic stuff. Let’s see, what’s good among the magitools... hmm? Shedy, you wanna see too?”

Tiz noticed me reaching on tiptoes to see the list of items being auctioned. He gave me a spare list.

So the yellow magic stone would be... the second one in the afternoon. The third one seemed to be a magitool with an interesting effect. I was a bit curious. Salia looked curious too, since she was sneaking peeks from behind me.

“...hey, you. Take it over here, it’s brighter.”

The hall’s lighting were off, perhaps to create atmosphere. The tables all had stylish-looking candles instead.

“...why not just turn on the light? They should have kept them on until the auction started. Are they skimping on magic?”

“Hah, what a bumpkin. This is a royal capital with a Sapling, there’s no reason to be stingy. Especially this place. The hall has a direct magic pipeline from the castle, it’d never have a blackout.”

“...I see.”

So the Sapling was in the castle, then... If I remembered correctly, 99 countries formed around the 99 Saplings, right?

Perhaps the humans had a method to extract and distribute the magic

from the Sapling everywhere throughout the country.

It'd explain the abundance of magical energy that I saw.

“But that’s enough of that. Get us our weapons. Being unarmed makes me jittery.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

We'd handed over our weapons at the reception. Salia was fidgeting. Instead of the new weapons, I gave her one of the dingy daggers I took from the bandits. She scowled, but still took it reluctantly.

At that moment, a spotlight shone on the stage. An announcement rang out to signify the beginning of the auction.

“The magic sword from the Labyrinth of Segal had gone to number 56 with a bid of 10 large gold coins and 1 silver coin. ”

That last silver was really petty.

There were a lot of people in the hall, but only around a hundred was participating. Morning bids were generally rather calm. The auction would only turn into a true arena for the rich in the afternoon, after lunch break was over.

People in normal seats either ate in the dining room or outside. However, apparently booth seats like ours can order food at the dining room to be brought to the table.

I couldn't really eat, but my **[Packer]** level was high enough to store water. I could pretend to chew, then store the food instead.

The stored food would be set aside for Blobsy later on.

After finishing the meal, I left my seat.

“Shedy, where are you going?”

“...the restroom.”

Tiz dismissively waved me off.

Both Salia and the butler weren't showing any signs they'd follow me.

They weren't that obsessive, it seemed. I was finally free to act.

I walked out the bright hallway, skipped past the restroom, and went to the back of the hall's ground floor. There, I saw stairs leading to the basement, and another hallway going deeper.

Which was the right path? I checked out the path leading deeper first, which led me to a metal door with two spear-wielding guards standing in front.

They stared at me, then knocked the butt ends of their spears on the ground.

"No one allowed after this point!"

"We won't hold back if you approach any further, guest or not!"

I see. Indeed, security was strict. Seeing a kid didn't loosen their vigilance in the least. I acted fearful and turned back. It seemed the basement was the right choice, instead.

If I forced my way through back there, it'd just raise a huge fuss. So I should do something about the strict security first.

The light dimmed as I went downstairs. I saw three shadows deep inside. They were playing cards, perhaps slacking off.

"There, a straight. That's my win."

"Aww hell, you gotta be kidding."

"Hold on, are you cheating?"

"Like hell I am. Come on, gimme the five silvers."

"Come on, man, it's right before payday here. I'm broke as fuck."

"Then how about this? You know we have a few chicks in the slave pen, right? Bring 'em."

"Whoa, you sure?"

"No one would know. Worst case scenario, if they get noisy, we can just off them. It's just going to be an apology letter at most."

“Alright, then I’ll-gah!” “Urgh-” “-argg!”

I snuck close in the cover of darkness and choked the men out in just a few moments, draining their life.

I saw words on the wall reading “Magic Routing Control”. Blobsy was left behind to clean up the corpses, while I ran in deeper.

Chapter 28 THE HEIST

Twenty-one days of borrowed time left.

I didn't see anyone else on my way to the underground Magic Routing Control room that was supplying power to the hall.

I was prepared to eliminate anyone who saw me, but that didn't mean I would happily carry out an indiscriminate mass murder. Still... all the same, I felt like human countries really just weren't for *me*.

...I wondered if this distaste came from the discrimination of appearance that I'd been experiencing since forever. It was likely.

Nothing would change with just the words of one person. Every humans, down to their children, only ever saw demihumans as their livestock, as useful beasts. There was no scorn nor disdain to be had here. They were just *animals*, after all, not *people*.

The kindness the humans showed to demihumans slaves was no different from the care a cowboy showed to his horse.

To the humans here, killing 'cattles' was nothing to feel guilty about.

I had always wondered why things were this way. The reason for it all lay *here*.

"...the Magic Routing Control room."

Mana overflowing from the World Tree's Saplings that were sustaining the world was gathered and sent everywhere.

Including this place.

Magic powered the trains and lit up the nights. A resource so vast no one even bothered to turn off the lights. It was just as vital to human convenience as electricity to modern Earth.

No. 01... Hans... he had left the following words in his will.

The human race, individually weak yet with high reproductive ability, had managed to conquer the whole world by *leeching* on the Saplings.

Doubtlessly, the other races with power had seen their weakness, and

so they had *allowed* the humans to cling to the Saplings in pity.

Yet the humans had discovered a way to utilize the mana. With their newfound power, they had driven all the other races away from the Saplings and took them as slaves.

And with the knowledge coming from another world – from modern Earth – their power had only grown.

This building was constructed with the premise that its magical lights would never be off. So I expected that once the auction hall plunged into darkness after losing its magic power supply, everyone inside would be bewildered.

Just candles alone wouldn't be enough light for the people here to fight in. It should be the moment right before No. 17's magic stone would be brought on stage. About fifteen minutes after the afternoon auction began.

After taking out the lights, I would head right toward the stage, kill only the people blocking my way, grab the stone, then make my getaway.

...this was the most harebrained scheme ever, even if I say so myself. However, I didn't have the time for careful planning, my clock was counting down, my lack of experience would just create a plan full of holes anyway, and most importantly, I'd never even done this sort of strategic thinking before.

I was playing this thing by ear. I couldn't afford any delays; it would just put me on the back foot.

Alright, let's roll.

I dispersed my arm to unlock the control room. With my claws and weapons, I began to turn everything inside into junk.

"Just what is that fool of a girl doing in the washroom?" Tiz muttered in incredulity.

The afternoon auction had begun for a while, yet Shedy still wasn't back. Tiz took a sip of spirits.

"Shall I search for her?"

"Nah, just leave her. She'll come back sooner or later."

Tiz looked to be fond of the girl, yet he still showed no concern.

He thought the impudent attitude was novel. She might still be a kid, but cute enough to have great prospects later on.

Rarely was there someone as *white* as her, and combined with her red pupils, she looked just like a rabbit. That delighted him.

Yet in the end, to him, it was nothing more than a rarely-seen coloring. Discovering her was no different from discovering a surprisingly nice knife in a bazaar.

Tiz's attachment to her was only the possessiveness of a man who didn't want his *thing* to run away.

People in positions of power like Tiz weren't ones to have a partner out of love in the first place.

Appearance and ancestry decided the woman standing beside him, while bloodlines decided the woman who would carry his children. These women might be important people, but he wouldn't *obsess* over them.

Tiz only had two fixations: the magical blade he acquired as a child, and the position he achieved by defeating his father.

An exotic-looking girl with an impudent attitude and a bit of beauty wasn't enough to earn his infatuation.

"Hmm?"

Just as the first item of the afternoon auction, a piece of jewelry, found its owner and the Yellow Magic Stone was being brought on stage, the light shining on the stage suddenly vanished.

"What happened?"

"Just a bit of theatrics... right?"

The auction originally began in a dark hall with only candle lights in the first place, so the attendees weren't thinking too much. Just a bit of chatter, at most. They were yet to aware that this was an *incident*.

The moment I destroyed the equipment, shutting off the light, I thought I heard a *voice*.

But this wasn't the time for hallucinations. I turned myself quasi-mist and rushed through the dark corridors at top speed.

Blobsy bounced at me as we regrouped, cheerfully diving into my satchel. Once she was secure, I dashed upstairs. There, I saw some staff members panicking from the sudden blackout.

The main doors and windows were letting in more light near the hall entrance, and naturally people gathered there. The staff members were frantically trying to stop the attendees' bodyguards from coming in, saying it was dangerous.

I promptly returned to the dark hallway leading further in. Those two guards standing watch were leaving the doors ajar, peeking inside to check on the situation.

Their eyes weren't used to the dark yet. I returned to **[Humanoid Form]** again, kicked the ground for a boost, and slipped through between the guards.

[Former Mercenary?] **[Race: Human**

] **[Guardsmen]**

[Magic Point (MP): 84/85] **[Hit Points (HP): 150/150]**

[Total Combat Power: 306]

"Something just came in!"

"It's a person!"

Right at that moment, someone inside summoned a magical light, covering the room in a faint glow. See? My plan was so full of holes.

“Stop them!” The guard shouted. One of the staff charged at me with just his fists. I stepped on his head and flew over.

“What the hell are you doing!?”

Another man right next to my side swung a crowbar. I blocked it with the dagger in my right hand, while the claws on my left hand sliced at him, crowbar and all. Whoa, my claws actually cut metal...

But I didn't even have the time to be surprising myself. I parried the spear stabbing toward me from the front with my dagger, and tore apart the guard's throat with my claws.

“Hahh!” A spear lunged at me from behind.

[Reroll]

I just barely dodged it and instantly responded with a kick. It broke his neck.

Damn it, why the hell is this turning into a messy melee!?

Luckily, my opponents were still unused to the dark. Dodging their attacks wasn't all that difficult, and I managed to win.

I knew it, detailed plans just weren't my thing. Some of the staff members were running away. I should head to the stage before this mess got any bigger. But then, a voice called at me from the darkness.

“W-Wait!”

Eh? Was there still someone left? I turned toward the voice, holding up my dagger. There, I saw two kids being bound inside a cage.

They looked about the same age as the body I currently had. A boy and a girl. They looked like each other, both having light-blond hair and very fair features.

They were only wearing what amounted to sheets with holes cut in for heads, so thin the fabric looked nearly transparent.

Their hands were bound in cuffs. Desperate blue eyes looked at me.

“...elves?”

“Yes! Please, let us out of here!” “We hadn’t done anything to humans!”

“Hold on, tell me what’s going on first...”

I didn’t have time, so I told them to just give me the cliff notes. Apparently, they used to live in a relatively large elven settlement. The settlement had been enjoying a comparatively peaceful relationship with this country by selling traditional handicrafts.

However, at some point, the king of this country began to demand a few slaves each year. The settlement could not comply, and diplomatic ties were cut. One day, they were suddenly attacked by soldiers. The men were killed, the treasures taken, the women and children captured.

“They said they were ‘pacifying a revolution’.”

“Eh? But your village wasn’t even a part of this country, right?”

“...yes.”

You sure they didn’t just want *pets* to play with?

“Do you have anywhere to run to?”

“A few of us managed to scatter and ran off. If we could just escape to the forest depths...” “...we might be able to find our friends again one day... Ah, sorry. You’re a human, you don’t really need to hear this...”

“No.”

I let my ears slipped out a bit from my hood. Their eyes widened.

“Y-You’re...”

“Don’t mind me. The most I can do is letting you go... move away.”

My claws sliced apart the lock and their handcuffs. I also handed them some spare robes and daggers, plus a few silver coins.

“U-Umm...”

“This is it. I can’t help you any further here.”

I turned to leave. The girl called after me, her voice choked in tears.

“One day... one day, we’ll repay you! We swear!”

The boy still kept silent, his head bowed low. He didn’t move even after I’d left their sight.

“...”

I knew it. I couldn’t bring myself to abandon someone I’d talked to... And I still had my own urgent problems to deal with, at that. In front of my eyes or not, I should leave the slaves alone next time.

Alright... let’s sow some more chaos on my way to the magic stone.

“Who’s there?”

A staff member asked, seeing me dashing out of the dark and into the faint magical light. Looked like they were still unaware of what had happened. Wait, was that the Elven Treasure that was supposed to come out next after the magic stone?

Seeing that I still wasn’t stopping, the guardsmen immediately crowded around the treasure. They stabbed their spears toward me without a single warning... Security was honestly *annoyingly* strict.

My combat power was good. My offensive versatility, less so. I was at a disadvantage every time I fought against multiple opponents. Still, high combat power meant higher speed and lower damage received from attacks.

With my wish of a combat-capable human form granted, the reflexes and instantaneous power I had when shapeshifted had risen by leaps and bounds. I could even *see* my opponents’ attacks happening, as if in slow motion.

I dodged the spears, letting them graze against my shoulder, and leaped right into the face of one of them. My dagger tore his throat apart.

“Whoa!?”

“We have a professional here! Be careful!”

The guardsmen swung their weapons without hesitation, even against someone who only looked like a kid. A few of them scratched me. I

continued parrying with my dagger and slicing throats with my claws.

I was still keeping my inhuman nature hidden, and so they were also only using unenchanted, mortal-killing weapons.

They still hurt, of course, but the damage was negligible. And I didn't have vital organs like humans in the first place.

Snap. My final bandit dagger broke. I'd been handling them... well, not exactly carefully. One of them took the chance to pierce my stomach with a spear from behind me.

"Here's our chance! Finish 'em off!"

Two guardsmen dropped their spears and unsheathed their swords. The dagger slipped from my fingers. Seeing me impaled, the two men approached without as much care as they should have. I drove two new daggers into their throats.

"Wha-" The guard impaling me cried out. I dispersed my left hand into a tendril, then solidified just the claws to tear off his throat.

Seeing the guards all dead in bare moments, the other staff members screamed. Too late.

I pull the spear out of my stomach, then picked up the Elven Treasure sitting on top of a fancy-looking service cart.

If only this was the magic stone I was looking for, I could have escaped right there and then. I took too much time with those elven kids...

[Shedy] [Race: Mistral] [Lesser Demon (High-Rank)]

☐The demon of bewitching mist that dances upon the northern seas. A canny spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 1095/1310] 210↑

[Total Combat Power: 1226/1441] 231↑

[Unique Skill: <Reroll> <Cyber-Manipulation>]

[Racial Skill: Fear]

[Simple Identification] [Humanoid Form (Master)] [Specialist Packer]

I had a bit of hope, seeing how the guardsmen were quite strong, but it looked like another evolution was out of the question so soon after ranking up.

Maybe the next evolution would happen at around 1500 or 2000 magic. I'd just have to make do with what I had. My magic dropped, but my base combat power rose, so all in all, my current power hadn't changed. It'd be fine, probably.

As I hurried to the stage, I saw a shining yellow stone within the darkness, being surrounded by a few guardsmen.

That's it... The stone I assimilated from No. 01 was telling me it was what I'd been looking for. No. 17's magic stone.

"Thief! There's a thief!"

I heard around ten pairs of feet running up behind me. Hearing the warning, the guardsmen on-stage pointed their spears at me. A commotion was starting up among the attendees, who had been left in the dark until now.

...I wondered if those kids made it out.

'I'm not coming to save you again if you get caught, alright!? I have my own problems here.'

A few guardsmen on the stage charged at me. At the same time, I leaped out from the wings, parrying the spears with a dagger while stabbing the closest guard in the face with another.

"AaaAAAAaAhh!?"

"They're fast! Don't use spears, use your swords-" one of them shouted, his hands getting ready to switch weapons. His throat got a **[Reroll]** ed thrown dagger. "-aghk!"

"Eat this! **[Sword Slash]**!"

One of the men chasing me slashed at my back. Seemed like the attack was magical, as it hurt quite a bit. I pretended to stagger, slicing at the

man's legs with my claws as I was falling down, then stabbing a dagger into his neck the moment I hit the ground.

“**[Ice Arrow] !**”

Ooof... Icicle spikes stabbed into my back. Looked like one of them knew magic.

Two men took the chance to attack. I rolled away from their blades, then dispersed both my arms into clawed tendrils of mist, shredding their throats.

“Magic?!”

The darkness continued to be my ally. They thought my attacks were just spells.

[Shedy] [Race: Mistral] [Lesser Demon (High-Rank)]

[Magic Points: 1080/1385] 75↑

[Total Combat Power: 1218/1523] 82↑

The guards stopped their attacks for a moment, cautious of magic. I took the chance to immediately dash toward the stone that was about to be carried off by a staff member. I kicked them away. The stone was flung into the air... and I swallowed it whole without a moment's hesitation.

[Shedy] [Race: Mistral] [Lesser Demon (High-Rank)]

[Magic Points: 1080/1535] 150↑

[Total Combat Power: 1218/1688] 165↑

[Evolution Available]

The moment one of Tiz's targets, the Yellow Magic Stone, was brought on the stage, the lighting shut off. As they waited in candlelight for the repairs to be done, a sudden commotion started up on the stage. Seeing his fun being spoiled, Tiz growled.

“What’s going on?!”

“Sir, I’ll go check right away...”

Salia reflexively responded, then upon further thinking, began to vacillate between whether she should prioritize Tiz’s safety or investigate the current incident. Her thoughts were interrupted by someone jumping on stage.

“I see, a thief!” Tiz stood up, his mouth in a savage grin. Then, noticing the lack of weapons on his hips, he scowled.

“Boy, no need to endanger yourself. This is not your country.”

“You don’t need to tell me, gramps.”

But Tiz’s displeasure soon disappeared. Lit by faint magical lights, the sight of the thief running amok on-stage had piqued his fancy.

The shadow was small, almost like they were just a child. Their opponents were ten-plus grown men. A few attacks hit the thief, yet they still fought without the slightest hesitation, dodging only the fatal blows. Tiz thought the sight was beautiful.

He wanted the thief... Still, even if he had no idea what they were after, they surely wouldn’t come out of this safe and sound after breaking into this auction.

Then the kid leaped toward the yellow magic stone, still faintly shining inside the darkness. Tiz thought he saw the thief *swallow* it. The noisy attendees, agitated by the battle, immediately quieted down as they felt the thief’s *presence* changing. Almost as if the thief had just transformed into *something* else.

The next moment, the stage was abruptly awash with a faint mist. The temperature inside the hall dropped sharply. Seeing that the people in contact with the mist were collapsing one after another, Tiz swung his arm at the stage.

“**[Fire Lance] !**”

A blast of fiery heat washed away the mist on-stage. The wind took off the hood of the thief. Lit by the flames, Tiz saw her face and her

drooping, rabbit-like ears.

“...Shedy!”

Chapter 28 RABBIT ROUGHHOUSING

“...A demihuman?”

“Is that... a beastman?”

Within the dark auction hall, all eyes were on the stage. The flames revealed a single girl of white, standing alone.

With the thief revealed to be the girl who had been with them until now, Tiz almost leaped from his seat. He glared at the girl.

“...Shedy!”

But was that girl truly *her*?

The first time he met her, he thought she was a ten-year old kid. The second time, she looked closer to eleven. Perhaps his first estimation was wrong, he thought. Nothing more.

It was true that kids possessing high magic, as they often did among the nobility, tended to grow up faster. Yet Shedy, standing on the stage, looked as if she had gained another year of age and height within as many days. The little girl was already turning into a young lady. She was showing the first hints of a deadly beauty.

However, it wasn't the most eye-catching thing about her. The audience was all staring at the pair of long, snow-white ears softly dangling from her head.

There were canine species with drooping ears, true, but the longest among them was only around 10 centimeters. No one had heard of, nor seen, such a species of beastman to have ears so long as to reach her chin. To have ears of a *rabbit*.

“...so, that girl was a rabbit beastman!!” Salia's shout echoed within the silent hall. Her words couldn't be clearer.

“...rabbit?” “A rabbit...” “Rabbit...!!!”

Mutters sounded out one by one. As they began to comprehend the words, the attendees ceased seeing her with fear and terror. *Desire* flooded their eyes.

“Get me that bunny!! That critter is MINE!!”

In one of the second floor booth seats, a chubby middle-aged noble leaned over the railing and screamed.

Tiz knew that face. He was the brother to the king of this Trestan Kingdom. Yet his position did nothing to deter the other attendees, full of the rich and the nobilities of other countries. Prompted by his shout and blinded by greed, they stood up, one after another, and gave orders to their own subordinates.

“Catch that rabbit girl!”

“No, auction her! I’ll pay one hundred large golds!”

“My trading firm will secure her! Get the bodyguards in here!”

“Don’t fuck with me! That rabbit belongs to Trestan Kingdom!”

“This is an auction, who the hell cares about that?! Grab her already!!”

A rabbit beastman. A race hitherto unseen, unheard of. And the girl was a beauty too, at that. She would fetch an absurd price.

Dozens of bodyguards were tripping over each other to fulfill their given orders. They flooded toward the stage. Seeing them, the auction host spat out orders to the surviving guardsmen.

“We’re taking her for our auction! Capture her, but don’t you dare harm a hair on her head! I’ll pay every one of you a large gold coin once she’s in my hands!”

Shedy just blankly stared and blinked. Her scarlet eyes swept through the hall, stopping at the approaching wave of guardsmen and escorts, and narrowed in disgust .

“Alright, just stay calm-aghk!”

A lithe swordsman was the first one to get up on the stage. Just as his bare hands were about to grab the girl, his movements inexplicably slowed down. The girl dashed in. Her dagger tore through his throat.

Then she bounced off. Several bodyguards reached for her, but the moment they came into contact with the mist overflowing from within her coat, their faces rapidly turned blue and their movements dulled. Daggers and claws ripped them apart.

Was that white mist some sort of ice magic?

The bodyguards realized this was no simple target. Some changed into magic, some broke apart a nearby chair to make impromptu bludgeons.

“This might hurt a bit, little bunny!”

One of the bodyguards quickly changed gears and grabbed a spear from the floor. He spun it, clearing off the mist, then used the pommel to jab at her.

“Agh!!”

Yet despite his seemingly-skillful spear handling, the man **mysteriously** slipped on a patch of frozen blood, losing his balance. The girl grabbed his face. His entire body rapidly turned pale as if the *heat* was being sucked out of him. In a blink of an eye, white ice covered him whole, and as the final slivers of life left him, the frozen statue shattered.

Witnessing the ruthless execution right in front of them and feeling the heat-sapping mist upon their skin, the bodyguards all went pale. They gulped.

On the second floor seating, Tiz was taking in the sight with blazing eyes. He asked the butler beside him, who was staring at the girl while looking just as pale as the bodyguards.

“Gramps... gramps! What the hell is going on?! How much is Shedy’s combat power?!”

Considering that they were employed by this auction hall, the guards must have their combat skill at level 3. Or as said among the adventurers, they were Rank 3.

And the attendees here were all either people with deep pockets or were powerful nobility. Their bodyguards must be at least Rank 4, like Salia. Perhaps there were even Rank 5s – fighters as skilled as master knights – among them.

Salia was a magic knight, possessing high magic. Her combat power was close to 400.

There should be plenty of other bodyguards here who were around her level. Even if they weren't allow use of their favorite weapons in their capture, and even if they were hindering each other, there should be at least dozens of people above 300 power. It's impossible for them to be having so many casualties to a little girl with only 200 combat power.

"I-I... I can not **[Identify]** her!"

"What?!"

"...her magic points, her hit points, her total combat power, they're all hidden to my eyes!"

That reminded Tiz of something. When they were at the adventurer's guild for her identification, the crystal displayed Shedy's magic as 120, combat power as nearly 200, but no hit points.

Only **[Total Combat Power]** and **[Magic Points]** were important in combat, so people paid less attention to **[Hit Points]** .

Even the guild staff thought it was just an error and ignored it. In hindsight, perhaps it was a sign Shedy was hiding her power.

"You've done it this time... Shedy!"

A gust of wind visited the stage, blowing away the cloying mist.

"Stop right there, villain!"

Rage colored Salia's face so red she was giving off steam. The knight pointed the dagger in her hand at Shedy.

Noticing the woman, Shedy subtly frowned. She silently turned to face the knight.

“What are you going to do with that dingy knife?”

“You dare say that after you’ve tricked me so, knave?!”

Salia was glowing crimson now. She slammed the bandit dagger Shedy gave her on the ground.

“Nothing short of death would redeem the deception you’ve inflicted on us! Your life ends here by my hand!”

“Really...”

To Salia’s furious declaration, Shedy only responded with a chilly glance. The girl leisurely readied a dagger in her left hand, while her right was hidden inside her coat.

“Come!”

Salia was confident. If Shedy was using a water-type mist spell, then she would have the advantage with wind-type spells.

Exactly the type of magic she specialized in.

‘So full of yourself with that mist, aren’t you? Let’s see how you like it when my wind blast you away, mist and all!’ Salia smirked.

And just like the knight woman expected, Shedy charged in while releasing mist from somewhere around her hidden right arm. Salia shot her arms forward.

“**[Wind Bomb] !**”

A burst of air exploded from Salia’s hands. Just as she predicted-no. *Exceeding* her predictions, Shedy blasted off as if she was weightless. The girl smiled and waved. She flew off above the heads of the surrounding bodyguards.

“Noooooo! Don’t run away, lowlife!!”

Shedy left Salia’s screams behind and leisurely landed back on the ground. Before the bodyguards could regain their senses, she dashed off into the crowd of attendees.

The ladies were shrieking and running from her. The merchants were reaching out with greedy eyes. Shedy simply responded with a large

cloud of mist, using it to slip through the crowd and dash for the exit.

On the way, her eyes met with Tiz's, who was still standing on the second floor. He bore his fangs in a savage grin and declared.

“Remember this, girl! I am Tischlar, the Twelfth Emperor of the Empire of Touze, and you. Will. Be. Mine! Just wait for it!”

“...”

Shedy gave no reply.

The girl escaped to the front doors and disappeared into the town. The king's soldiers were sent out on searches, but they were unsuccessful. She was no longer in the capital.

This was the beginning of a flood of extravagant bounties set by the wealthy, and by the nobles of Trestan and of other countries. Yet even among them, the bounty set by the hands of the Emperor of Touze himself was head and shoulders above. All within the central continent were aware of the lavish reward.

Wanted

A young white-colored rabbit beastman girl, who commands a magical mist.

Whosoever will apprehend and deliver the girl shall be handsomely rewarded.

The girl must not be harmed.

The Emperor of Touze swears upon his name: whosoever accomplishes this matter, shall be given Five Thousand Large Gold Coins as recompense.

Incidentally, many had expected this event to further aggravate the marginalization of beastmen, yet it was not so. On the contrary, demand for young, pale-colored or lop-eared canine beastman girls

surged. They were sold for extremely high prices and granted a life of luxury by their buyers.

Chapter 29 A NEW COUNTRY

In the 7th research center of a certain pharmaceutical company, situated within a certain country of Earth, there was a researcher. The head researcher, in fact – even if these days, most of her hours were taken up by secretarial work for the Deputy Director, Brian. One of her colleagues had just shared with her an image they thought was interesting.

“Can’t be... but, what if...” Audrey muttered. The scene was burned into her mind.

Yggdrasia. A whole new world presented as fiction, as nothing more than a virtual reality game.

So-called ‘players’ were sent to this world as harvesters of a new form of energy, called ‘mana’. To lay the foundations, the corporation had begun interfering with the new world’s human countries since a decade ago. Temples were built in all of them as mana collectors and as revival points for players.

Yggdrasia’s humankind believed these were Temples of the God of Knowledge. In truth, these buildings served as bases for the corporation’s staff members and digistructed equipment, for on-site analysis of local peculiarities such as mana and materials, and for surveillance.

One hundred thousand AI-driven, stealth-focused remote-controlled drones were used as scouts and spotters. They flew around the whole world to survey terrains and climates. In seldom cases, a particularly perceptive monster or some other cause might still be able to heavily damage them. All the same, overall performance was good, and Earth received a massive amount of information.

Once the drones’ AI detected an unusual event, their programming required them to hurry toward the scene and record what they could. The drones at Trestan Kingdom, a country in the north-western corner of the central continent, had detected one such event at the auction hall and had recorded a part of it.

Right in front of the Deputy Director’s room was Audrey’s own desk. Using a audiovisual-only VR set, she replayed the copy of the recorded

data that was sitting in her mobile device.

In front of her eyes, she saw a small girl fighting against a large group of grown adults inside the auction hall.

The video was filled with a strange white noise, almost like mist or smoke, and the girl's movements were abnormally fast. Audrey couldn't see what she looked like. Luckily, when the girl was sent flying by a wind spell, her side profile appeared on the screen for a split second.

And immediately after that, the screen whited out as if the drone was swallowed in mist, and it malfunctioned. The recording data ended there. Audrey's colleague had lamented about the white noise. They thought the fight would have made for a great trailer video, if only the recording wasn't so blurry.

“...”

But Audrey thought the girl looked familiar. Almost like a feeling of déjà-vu.

She had white skin, white hair... and scarlet eyes. Normally characteristics of an albino, yet with the addition of her long ears, she looked just like a rabbit beastman girl.

More than anything, however, glimpsing the side of her face reminded Audrey of a certain girl.

“...number 13...”

The final alpha tester. An albino girl born with a special power, who was called a ‘demon’ by her own mother. Her consciousness was already gone, and her comatose body was being kept in the collection facility.

Audrey remembered very clearly the photo attached to the documents detailing the girl's personal information. It's hard to forget that stare.

They just looked similar, that's all.

Most people would brush off the matter with that. Yet for some reason, Audrey could not separate the rabbit girl from No.

13. Still, the woman decided to bury her unease, despite the protests coming from her intuition.

After I escaped the auction hall, I quickly blended into the crowd. I...

bouncy-bounce

We didn't stay there for long. The two of us climbed on top of a building and started jumping roofs. An express train was about to leave right at that moment, so I clung to the train's roof. We were out of the capital city.

I spent a whole day on top of the train. Once we reached the next town, I got on another train – officially, this time, with ticket bought – before the news about me could catch up, and left the country border.

I only needed to give the ticketing office my money and show them a peek of my adventurer's card, and they let me on.

They didn't check on me too closely.

I was curious, so until the train arrived, I chatted with the middle-aged woman selling tickets. She seemed like the gossipy type. Apparently, adventurer's cards remembered the holder's magic. If someone else was holding them – for example, a bandit – then the card would show a black mark. It would be unusable.

So basically, you would be checked quite meticulously when you entered a large town, but inside, you just showed your card and the guards would let you go anywhere. So sloppy.

By the way, I already threw away that conspicuous red hoodie along the way. Obviously.

The train I was on was going to the east of Trestan Kingdom. Its destination was a small country called Anneuf.

Saying 'neighboring country' might give the wrong impression. In contrast to countries of Earth, which were densely packed together and covered all the land people could live on, countries here only formed around the extremely-convenient World Saplings. So there was quite a distance. It would take a whole three days of non-stop running for the express train to arrive.

Actually, this was pretty much the same speed as a linear motor train, wasn't it? The scenery was just blazing by. Yet even when I opened the window, all I felt was a nice breeze. I wondered if the whole train was covered with a forcefield.

They did have a lot of magic to waste, after all.

Well, scenery-watching like this wasn't much different from looking through an airplane's window, anyway...

Trains that crossed country borders like this one had eight cars, three of them for passengers. Twelve rooms in total.

Currently there were only seven groups of passengers, so I had a whole room to myself.

From the window, I watched the white-capped mountain range passing by. I could finally take a breather. I took out some food I bought from the dining hall to feed Blobsy, while checking on the results of my evolution.

[Shedy] **[Race:** Mistral Neige] **[Greater Demon (Low-Rank)]**

☐The demon of tempestuous mist that ravages the northern seas. A canny spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 1950/1950] 415↑

[Total Combat Power: 2145/2145] 457↑

[Unique Skill: <Reroll> <Cyber-Manipulation> <Absorption>]

[Racial Skill: Fear]

[Simple Identification] **[Humanoid Form (National Treasure)]**
[Specialist Packer]

...alright, where do I even start?

First off, my class finally reached **[Greater Demon]**. My combat power might not look like it grew all that dramatically, but I felt like my attacks had gotten quite a bit heavier due to the higher density – or perhaps I should say ‘thicker mist’ –

that I now had. In other words, a flat power increase.

Next, ‘*neige*’? If I remembered my French right, that meant ‘*snow*’, right? My newly-acquired unique skill probably had something to do with it.

That yellow magic stone carried within it No. 17’s power.

The unique skill [**Absorption**] ... If I remembered correctly, the avatars’ ability to absorb mana from killed enemies was derived from this power. And as the source, No. 17’s power was a lot more versatile.

In my case, the lifeforce absorption I could do through my mist now went much more smoothly. Not only that, I could now absorb the *heat* in my surroundings in order to create cold air.

My combat versatility would be getting a huge boost just from this change alone.

Next... my [**Humanoid Form**]. Once again, this skill was using the weirdest words to describe improvement... this was *better*, right? What the hell did it mean by (National Treasure)...? What sort of evaluation was this?

As always, my insides were mist. On the surface, however, I looked one-hundred percent human. Absolutely no difference.

I grew in height, too, perhaps due to my higher density. Upon first gaining a body, I looked about 10 years old, at about 135 centimeters. My next growth put me at 140, and now I was around 145.

But it wasn’t just the height. A few parts of me, such as my cheeks, got a bit of a touch-up, and I was looking more feminine. Did the increase to (National Treasure) have something to do with it? I looked like a perfectly normal 12 years old kid.

But the ears. The thrice-damned ears. And the puff of tail, too. No wonder I kept getting mistaken for a rabbit beastman.

And surprises after surprises, Tiz turned out to be an emperor somewhere. I even got a weird declaration from him. Was it just because I was a rare rabbit race? Well, not like I knew how serious he was, anyway.

Now that I thought about it, there was a very real possibility people would put out a hit for the 'killer rabbit' after that rampage. I wasn't sure how developed this world's information network was, but maybe I should leave before border control noticed me.

In this respect, I was really lucky to have gotten the Elven Treasure when I did.

It looked like a pretty silver necklace. Supposedly, this was a magitool. According to the explanation on the auction listing, it helped the wearer gain control over the presence they emitted.

No wonder it was an Elven Treasure. The race was full of hunters, after all.

Upon seeing what it did, I thought perhaps it could hide me from **[Identification]** too.

If my hypothesis was right, **[Identification]** didn't simply pull information about the target out of nowhere. The names I saw when I used the skill changed all the time, after all, so it must be relying on the user's observational and detection skills to output the numbers.

In which case, if I could hide my presence well enough, would it be enough to fool anyone trying to **[Identify]** me, too?

At the very least, they wouldn't think I was a demon even if they were suspicious of me.

Maybe this was the treasure that those elven kids said was stolen from them. Still, it wasn't like I could give it back to them now, anyway.

So, plans for the future. I'd need to start gathering information about the final magic stone, the one belonging to No. 08, once I could get inside Anneuf safely.

Twenty days of borrowed time left...

If it was on another continent, I'd be so dead. Still, the three of them agreed to meet up with each other. They had to be on this continent.

Let's see, the fastest way would be... yeah, it'd be making contact with beta players.

I could tell them the truth, but I didn't think they'd believe me. No. 01's story was only barely believable to me due to his

– and my own – desperation. Also, if those corporate people found out I was No. 13, they might decide to get rid of my body on Earth.

So I'd need to hide what I knew. I'd need to make contact with the beta players as a native... or in their eyes, as an NPC.

...to be honest, even I thought my plans were *really* haphazard. Well, not like this was a new thing to me, anyway.

Even if I acquired the information, if my target was far away, I'd be needing more travel expenses. Gotta earn money, too... what a pain. I only had one large gold and three small golds left from the money I took from those traffickers.

I only had a coat, which I was wearing over my blouse and skirt, and a robe left as my spare clothes. I wanted some more clothing, too.

...so many things to do.

Two days later, the train arrived at a port town that was the gateway to the country of Anneuf. I escaped as mist before border control came to inspect the train and disappeared into the town.

Author's Note: The path she took this chapter. The numbers are the order in which the saplings were discovered.



*I used the same system of combat power as in my other work. If anyone's curious, please check [this chapter](#) out.

Chapter 30 CONTACT WITH PLAYERS

VR chat boards of the MMORPG, *World of Yggdrasia*. Here, discussions continued just as they always have been.

“Right, so have anyone else heard about how the beta test’s going to end earlier than scheduled?”

“Really? Man, that sucks. I just got to Rank 3 recently. Things were just getting good!”

“Come on OP, that’s ignoring a lot of the facts. To be more precise, the official release is coming out early.”

“Mmm? Aren’t they the same thing?”

“It’s not the end of the beta test, the test continues into the official release. Announcement said we can either keep our characters or make new ones when it’s out.”

“Shit, I can’t decide. It’s a waste to just delete this character after all my effort, but at the same time, I know how to spend stat points better now. And I wanted to fix up my looks a little bit, too.”

“LOL, y’all spend too much time in character creation. Why not petition the devs for a one-time appearance editor?”

“By the way, you think it’s a quest?”

“What is?”

“That super-extravagant bounty issued by Touze Empire. Limited to the central continent, though.”

“Oh yeah, that bounty in the adventurer’s guild board? That’s for real?”

“Guys, deets. I’ve been holing up on the mountain killing orcs these days, haven’t gone back to town.”

“Wait, you mean the bounty that has its own chatroom? The ‘Searching for the Bunny Girl’ room? It’s actually a thing? I heard rumors saying the bounty’s 5000 large golds or something?”

“Five fucking thousands?!!”

“Yeah, that. The quest where you’re supposed to find and capture the only living rabbit beastman girl left.”

“I just had a great idea!”

“Then don’t say it if you don’t want a police visit. Anyway, maybe it’ll turn out to be a choices-matter kind of quest?

Like, by the end of the quest you can choose to either turn her in for the money, or you can get a cute bunny girl as a party member. That sort of thing?”

“First off, is she actually cute?”

“No idea. Supposedly, the magic stone that the European players got from the ‘Subdue the Berserkers’ event and then auctioned off was stolen by her. So there’s a high chance it’s actually a quest chain.”

“Aww crap, so that magic stone was actually that expensive...?”

“Apparently the high bounty’s not because the stone was valuable, it’s because the bunny girl’s super *kawaii*. I heard that the players who auctioned the stone off didn’t actually attend, and that they’re now kicking themselves over it.”

“They got some compensation from the auction host, though. A *whole* 10 gold coins. Wow.”

“I get your sarcasm, but honestly that’s still a lot of money.”

“...maybe we shouldn’t auction ours off?”

“Whoa, what? You have an event magic stone?”

“We got a **[Red Magic Stone]** from the toad in the trailer. Our clan’s been considering where to sell it. But maybe we can use it as bait for the bunny girl?”

“A big clan? Then I suppose it’s fine. Still, don’t talk about it here. You might get people trying to steal it.”

“It’s probably fine. Our clan only have around ten people, but half of us are Rank 4. The leader’s a decent guy, so we have pretty good relations with the other clans. The problem is... if getting the bunny girl to be a companion turns out to actually be possible, our group might fracture from a difference of opinions.”

“So which choice are you going for?”

“The recruiting option, obviously!”

“Seconded!” “Thirdded!” “Fourthed!” (*guy players*)

“Yeah, I wanna dress her in a real bunnygirl outfit and set her to work at our clan hall!”

“...ewww...” “I hope I never get a boyfriend like you guys.” “So typical.” (*girl players*)

Eighteen days of borrowed time left.

I could see the corner that I was being pushed into getting closer and

closer. Normally this would be the point where I would start to either panic, give up, or get reckless, but I didn't come this far just to get a breakdown. Besides, I couldn't let that corporation get off scot-free now. I'm going to *show* them.

I needed to survive first, though.

Anneuf was a nice-looking port town. White buildings ascended in steps along gently-sloping streets, all roofed with red bricks in a consistent theme. Despite the distance from the equator, this country was still comfortably warm, thanks to the Sapling.

There was a castle on the highest point of the town. At first, I thought it belonged to the lord of this area. After checking on the guide map board, it turned out it was the king's.

Wow, so a small country was *really* small compared to a large one... Were the international trains only stopping at the capitals?

I walked around, checking on a few different bulletin boards. Looked like fishing was the main industry of this country, and their specialty was a type of fish similar to herrings. The streetside stalls mostly sold sandwiches, which were pickled raw herrings and potatoes between slices of rye bread. Even if I could actually eat, I wouldn't buy those... or it might be surprisingly tasty. Who knows?

bounce

'Eh...? Blobsy, you wanna eat that ?'

My conclusion was that the adventurer's guild was my best chance for information. Would I have to actually buy one of those pickled-herring-potato sandwiches just to get a chance to ask where the guild hall was?

A few moments into my deliberations, I heard a commotion starting up on the other side of the street. I saw about ten knights, or maybe soldiers, all using pommels of their spears to bludgeon two screaming persons in adventurer's equipment. The pair were then arrested and taken away, toward the direction of the castle.

What happened...? I got curious. I decided to buy a herring-potato sandwich (three coppers) from a nearby stall and ask the owner about it. They scowled, looking toward the arrested pair, then sighed.

“They were making a fuss at another stall, demanding the owner to release the demihuman slaves that were working there.

He refused, obviously. Then they started speaking gibberish. I think it was... let's see... ‘Just a fucking en-pee-see’? Or something like that. After that, they pulled out their weapons and started threatening him, which got the guards coming.”

“I see...”

I supposed they meant ‘NPC’? So those two were beta players, then.

They looked young, enough so that I couldn't determine whether they were kids in real life or if they were just idiots.

Really, even if this was an actual game, which it wasn't, that didn't mean players would get an automatic pass to do anything they wanted. No wonder they got arrested.

“There'd been more and more of those weird adventurers recently. Apparently even the guild was having a headache. Like hiring a veteran adventurer to be their guide and then skipping out on the payment, or buying up all the young slave girls, etcetera. They caused a lot of trouble, I hear.”

“Huh, they did that...?”

“And this time, they're even demanding freedom for the demihuman slaves. Is this some new sort of *thievery*? Honestly.

The demihumans were getting more clever these days, it's getting so much more difficult buying new replacements.”

“...”

Demihumans really were just considered possessions here...

I asked for the location of the guild hall and started walking there.

From the train station to the main street was a short walk, and from the main street to the guild hall took a bit longer. It was a four-story block of pure whiteness.

I didn't enter the guild hall right away. Nearby was a shop selling

adventurer's equipment, which I visited first. I saw a few adventurers browsing around inside.

I went toward the corner selling cloaks and coats, trying not to draw any attention to myself. I started searching.

It needed to be tough and looked nice too, if possible. I did also want some clothes, but maybe I should wait until I passed another growth spurt? Deferred, then. Let's get some sturdy boots instead. Honestly speaking, I was already nearly outgrowing the pair I currently had. With targets decided, I started looking.

I wasn't left alone, however.

"Fashion in this country isn't really all that good, don't you think?"

A blue-haired adventurer, looking around twenty, just decided to talk to me out of nowhere.

"Terrible designs. And they don't even have the variety in colors to make up for it. At least the large countries have more stores to..."

"Sally! She's not a player!"

"Eh?!"

So-called Sally was interrupted by a new face. A man, halfway into his twenties. Sally stared at me.

"Oh, wow! She really doesn't have the player's mark!"

Apparently they were players, and only players could see who else were players.

That's fine and all, but I really wished she'd stop it with the staring. I didn't think the corporation was monitoring all ten thousand players, but it'd still be a lot of trouble if players were suspicious of my face.

I stayed quiet. I moved a few steps away, hiding my face with the hood. The man cut in between us.

"I told you, stop it. This game doesn't use any ordinary AI. I'm not going to help if you get arrested and your character deleted, alright?" The man turned to me. "Sorry about that." He said, sounding not particularly sincere.

"But-I mean, I thought she was a real person, wearing those clothes..."

They weren't caring much about keeping meta talk away from NPCs, it seemed. I never expected my choice of clothing was what nearly gave me away.

I'd been wondering what would happen to arrested players. Apparently the corporation would just delete them. To the locals, the crime would go forever unsolved. I vaguely remembered this being explained to me in the very beginning, I think.

"No, I don't mind," I dismissed their concern with a light shake of my head. The man left the store, dragging Sally behind him. Nothing happened, thankfully.

I sighed in relief. Because really, that guy was actually quite strong.

[Warrior-ish Man] [Race: Human

] [Player]

[Magic Points (MP): 150/150] [Hit Points (HP): 260/260]

[Total Combat Power: 1110]

Tiz would eat his dust. I suspected that the System-governed players could grow more efficiently than the natives of this world. They had no areas they were weak in. They didn't even need to worry about learning how to handle weapons, nor did they need to manually train up their skills like the natives. They just needed to absorb magic power.

Sure, I grew quite strong myself. But if the players could grow the same way, group battles might become the death of me... Still, I couldn't stop here. I'd come too far.

I changed into a decent-enough coat and pair of boots, paid for them, and left. The guild hall was across the street.

No one bothered to make trouble for me in broad daylight, thankfully. Slipping inside the hall, I saw over a dozen idle, loitering adventurers. There were a few who looked like they might be players, too. Why were there so many of them now? There was barely any in the last country I was in.

Most of them were crowding around the bulletin board. I glanced at it. Looked like a bounty or something.

Wanted

A young white-colored rabbit beastman girl, who commands a magical mist.

Whosoever will apprehend and deliver the girl shall be handsomely rewarded.

The girl must not be harmed.

The Emperor of Touze swears upon his name: whosoever accomplishes this matter, shall be given Five Thousand Large Gold Coins as recompense.

...what in the *name of all things holy* was Tiz doing?! Five thousand large golds for my capture? Was this guy an idiot?

The crowding adventurers were all hyped. They weren't even talking about where I could be or how to capture me, they were only chatting about the things they would do after they got the money.

Still, this was just a distraction. I needed to find No. 08's magic stone.

I secured my hood, then approached one of the idle reception counters. Behind it was a man neck-deep in documents. He looked just like the quintessential public servant, in both appearance and impression.

"Can I buy information here?"

"Oh, yes. What would you like to know?"

The receptionist looked up. He looked nervous, despite his polite speech.

"I'm looking for a magic stone. It looks like a gem."

"Aaah, apologies. We're not aware of any such stone."

He replied, then returned to his documents. He didn't even bother to check the records. Was it because the guild didn't deal in such information, or did he not want to bother with me because I looked

like a kid? As I mulled over what to do next, I heard a frivolous voice calling at me from behind.

“Oh, you knew about the stone? Are you joining the event?”

Chapter 31 TRAVELING WITH PLAYERS

“Oh, you knew about the stone? Are you joining the event?”

I turned around. Standing there was a blond-haired man. He was good-looking, but he also looked like such a sleazy skirt-chaser it ruined the whole impression. Two daggers were dangling on his hips.

Event? Magic stone? Were they players, then?

I slightly raised my vigilance and moved back half a step. That got him flustered. He waved his hands and stepped back.

“Ah, no, sorry, didn’t mean to scare you. We just put out an announcement, and I was worried no one would come, so when I heard ‘magic stone’ I just reflexively called at you. My name’s Weed. I’m a member of the clan that announced the event.”

“...tell me more.”

I played dumb in an attempt to glean some information. But... wait a minute? I thought the beta players could distinguish between NPCs and players?

Well, whatever. For some reason, he seemed interested in my *face*. He continued his explanation while constantly sneaking glances at my hooded head.

Supposedly, their group thought Tiz’s bounty was a game event. They also possessed the **[Red Magic Stone]** they got from killing another one of us in that event. And since they knew the ‘rabbit beastman girl’ stole the yellow magic stone, they were planning to use theirs as bait to lure me out.

“Around tomorrow, there’ll be a notice saying ‘Finding Buyers for the Red Magic Stone’ posted in all the central continent’s adventurer guilds and a few other places. But with such a high bounty, we weren’t really expecting the bunny girl to show up inside the town. It’s really just people gathering up for a party. So yeah, I was hoping more girls could come-”

“Hey, Weed!”

Another interruption. Such déjà vu... Both of us turned to look at the voice. There, I saw the powerful adventurer I met in the armor shop. Sally was behind him, facepalming and going “Aww, crap.”

“Oh hey. Isaac, I was just inviting this girl...”

“No no no, she’s not a player!”

“...wha?! Holy shit, she doesn’t have the mark!”

Weed stared in shock, alternating his gaze between me and a spot slightly to the upper-left of me. This again? Yes, yes, I got it, now could you please stop looking at my face?

“I mean, she just looks so natural-”

“I know, right?! Like, the atmosphere she has, her mannerisms, they’re all a lot more similar to us than the ingame NPCs here!”

Weed began his excuse, which was then overwhelmed by Sally’s own... wait, actually Sally sounded a lot like Salia. So easy to mix up.

Both of them continued their incomprehensible-to-NPCs rants. The powerful adventurer – Isaac, was it? – deeply sighed and turned to me.

“Again, sorry about that. You don’t really understand what they’re saying, right? Don’t mind them, just forget about it.”

...well, about that...

“I heard you’re baiting the ‘rabbit’ in the bounty?” I asked.

Isaac’s smile twitched. “Weed, what the hell have you been saying?”

“Uhh... everything?”

“Damn it, didn’t I tell you? This game’s AI has way too many dialogue and action patterns. Don’t be careless.”

“...but, I mean, you’re talking a lot of meta stuff in front of her too, aren’t you?”

They really weren’t very vigilant at all in front of NPCs, were they? Isaac’s been ignoring me, until his friends finally pointed out his own

mistake.

“Ah. Whoops.” Once again, he turned his strained smile back to me. “Oh well... so I see you look quite young, but I guess you’re an adventurer too, right?”

I nodded. Isaac seemed to have finally shaken off his hesitation. He spoke up for both me and his comrades to hear.

“As you heard, we’re about to go on a rabbit hunt. The chances are low though, so it’s really half serious, half an excuse to get together and have fun. There’s no guarantee we’ll get rewarded even if the capture’s successful. Still, if you don’t mind us hiring you, we can pay you 3 small golds. How about it?”

“...hiring?”

Apparently Isaac had decided to bring me along under his employ. Why?

“Whoa, for real? Hell yeah!” Weed cheered.

“Hold on, Isaac?! Are you really bringing this NP-I mean, this girl along? Isn’t she a stranger?”

“Sally, too loud. What if she talk to other adventurers, and then they come to mess things up? We’re bringing her along to keep it secret from the normal adventurers,” Isaac replied.

“...I suppose.”

“Awesome!”

“Learn your lesson already, Weed!”

“Heheheh, alright, let’s go!”

Looked like they never even entertained the possibility that NPCs could refuse.

Can’t be helped, I supposed. If anything, this was actually better for me. I didn’t know what sort of event they were going to set up, but as long as I could get my hands on the red magic stone, it’d be fine.

...it was No. 08’s stone, right? Should be. Otherwise I’d be so screwed.

“Well then, let’s talk about our schedule.”

“Mmm.”

According to Isaac, the event would be one week later. He had already notified his friends (through the internet). Anyone who could come was welcomed to.

It would be held at their base, in the outskirts of the Free City of Seis. They showed me the spot on the simple map posted inside the guild hall. It was hella far away. It was a large country on the eastern end of the central continent.

I wondered how we were going to get there in just a week. Isaac explained. First off, the group would go by slow rail to a nearby large country called Battrol, switching trains along the way. This would take four days. Then once we were there, we’d take the airship.

...an *airship*?!

“Yeah. We have a yearly pass. I think we can get them to accept you as a party member.”

This was the first time I’d ever heard of airships. According to them, only the large countries had the necessary airports, and you could go to any other large country in the world in just one to two days with it.

Until Battrol, we’d just be riding normal trains, not express. They said they were here to earn some money in the first place. Wasting large gold coins for a quick ride would just be defeating the purpose.

We got on the cheapest train we could find. A bit tight, but still we managed to find a four-person room. We finally had time for proper introductions.

“We were hunting the water lizards in the bog nearby. Their hides and magic stones fetch a pretty good price in the Free City. So... what’s your name? I’m Sandra. Just call me Sally!”

“Hi, Sandra. I’m Sherry.”

The group composed of Isaac the warrior, Weed the speedy fighter, and Sandra the magician. Of course, I wasn’t naive enough to use my real name here. The fake name wasn’t all that different, since I needed to be able to respond to it quickly enough if someone called me.

For some reason, Sandra pushed her beaming smile right next to my face after hearing my greeting.

“Sally is fine!”

“Hi, Sandra.”

“Really, just call me Sally...”

“Hi, Sandra.”

“...”

I really didn't want to confuse her with silly Salia. And before I knew it, my insistence had already prompted Isaac and Weed to start calling her Sandra too. She was appalled.

Miss Sandra. I can hear you whispering “Dumbass AI...” over there. Whisper quieter.

“What will you do about food?” I asked.

“We'll just grab whatever in real-ouch!”

“We have something to eat, don't worry about it.”

Isaac elbow-jabbed Weed for his careless words.

On the train, I still went and bought food (for Blobsy's consumption) from the cafeteria to keep up the ruse. On the other hand, despite being inside a train car, the group sometimes disappeared.

So they were logging out to eat, then. There were times when Sandra disappeared for a whole twelve hours, even times when only one of them remained in the game. Weed was mostly here. He was here too often. I worried for his real life.

“It's nice, just the two of us alone like this. Hey, Sherry, anything you want to know about me? For a cutie such as you, I'll answer any question you have!”

“Then, how do I delete you...?”

“You have a surprisingly sharp tongue!”

He was constantly, *annoyingly* attempting to start up conversations, plus his eyes actually felt kind of dangerous, so I shut him down every time he started talking. Then, once in a while, he would stop moving and stared into empty air.

‘...so there’s this NPC girl who’s super frosty to me...’

A closer look revealed that his lips were barely moving. Maybe he was chatting with someone somewhere.

Honestly, were they even trying to fool me?

I supposed that in the end, this was just a game to them, and I was just an NPC. After seeing me unresponsive to anything meta, they kept getting more and more careless, and their logout times became more and more frequent.

It wasn’t really a problem for me, since I had no plans to make friends with them. All the same, even when they knew the NPCs here were acting just like real living people, they still wasn’t treating me as one. Even until now.

...I could see this causing all sorts of issues. Good luck, game moderators. Not like it’s my problem though.

And on the day before we reached Battrol’s first station, the three of them finally logged out at the same time.

It seemed they’d been grinding their magic skills on the train, but it wasn’t enough to distract themselves from the boredom.

As they disappeared, I noticed a strange pool of mana on the floor. It had a protecting barrier. It was probably marking the spot for their subsequent login.

I carefully tested out a bit of **[Cyber-Manipulation]** on it, subtle enough that the corporation wouldn’t find out. As I did, I got a response similar to my **[Packer]** skill. After some deeper snooping, I found some equipment that could be accessed through my own **[Packer]** skill. They looked like they belonged to the three.

This was a welcome surprise. Even if I couldn’t take them out, it might still be possible to play a bit of a *prank*.

An hour before the train reached the first station, the three finally reappeared.

“Alright, finally here! I can’t wait for the sky trip!”

“Yeah, the game’s so worth it just for the sightseeing alone.”

Sandrea and Weed immediately crowded the window. They had completely turned into gawking tourists now, entranced by the view of farmlands, villages, and the approaching town. Only Isaac was still in his seat. He seemed concerned, seeing me staying so still.

“Were you fine alone?”

“Yeah.”

I acted the part of an obedient NPC. He relaxed and whispered under his breath, “Yeah, of course, I suppose there wouldn’t be a problem when you’re an NPC...”

If only I was just a normal player...

Too late, now. I was neither a player, nor a native of this world. I had become something *in between*.

The moment that corporation betrayed all one hundred of us, players were no longer our allies.

[Isaac] [Race: Human

] [Player]

[Magic Points (MP): 150/150] [Hit Points (HP): 260/260]

[Total Combat Power: 1110]

[Sandrea] [Race: Human

] [Player]

[Magic Points (MP): 190/190] [Hit Points (HP): 135/135]

[Total Combat Power: 790]

[Weed] **[Race:** Human

] **[Player]**

[Magic Points (MP): 140/140] **[Hit Points (HP): 180/180]**

[Total Combat Power: 665]

Fourteen days of borrowed time left.

I could see the end of the line. Better be prepared, you three. Sooner or later, you'll become my meal.

Author's Note: I heard the old meme "How do I delete you?" that used to be popular back in the day actually gets an answer nowadays.

Slight exposition. Player storage.

When players died, they dropped their equipment on the ground, except for event items.

As mentioned in the story, the logout spot will be marked, and their items would be stored inside it. Then why were players not allowed to use **[Packer]** normally? Because maintaining the marked storage requires a bit of mana. Generally, the chance of players recovering their items were low, so for the purpose of economizing mana use, the game developers decided to remove the ability entirely.

Below is the travel path for this chapter and the next. There are some slight adjustments to the path Shedy's taken until now, mainly because of time and date reasons.

needed to present his adventurer's card, and the other party members only needed to show that they also possessed their own cards, and we were in.

They really should have checked all of us. The officers probably found it too troublesome.

So, back to the airship. It really was incredible.

The most incredible thing about it was that it *actually* looked like a ship. 60 meters long, 20 meters wide, made out of steel and wood, with eight propellers that were obviously much too small to drive a ship of that size. Yet it flew as fast as a jet airplane. Magic was awesome.

The cheapest ticket was 1 large golds and 5 small golds. The top floor rooms were 3 large golds.

So the cheapest ticket would be around the same price as riding an express train, right? Sadly, no. They weren't tickets for the whole ride. They were tickets for a single day of stay.

If you were traveling within a single continent, a day was enough. Crossing continents, however, doubled the price.

Basically, you were paying for a flying hotel room.

Isaac's group's yearly passes only allowed them to stay in the bottom twin room. If they wanted, they could upgrade their rooms with an extra fee.

Their yearly passes also allowed me to get a party member discount, but not a free ride. I still needed to pay one small gold as the bed-making service fee.

By the way, Isaac paid it for me.

Just as I was about to say my thanks, I found out they got the yearly passes as the reward for killing us. Screw you, then.

No gratitude for you.

Sandrea and Weed impatiently jumped aboard. The two flitted around, going from frolicking on the top deck to watching the ground zip by in the observation deck at the bottom of the ship. I thought

they were familiar with flying already? They acted like children. By dinnertime, though, all three of them disappeared into their rooms.

Our rooms were separated into the guys' and the girls'. I checked on mine and didn't see Sandra there, so she must have logged out.

Food was already included in the fare. I didn't want to waste the luxurious meal, so I cleaned it all up (with Blobsy).

boing-boing!

'You liked it? Good for you.'

I didn't need to sleep, and neither was there any point in just sitting alone inside my room. I decided to go to the top deck to check out the night view.

The ship had a protective bubble. Despite flying through open air at super-speed, the most I felt was just a comfortable breeze. I secured my hood, just in case, and watched the far-off mountain.

According to the guidebook, that was Mount Leonard. It was the tallest mountain in the central continent, as well as home to one of the most prominent mines. Surrounding it were three large countries, which included Battrol. Their conflicts over the mountain's rights were unending, apparently.

...I supposed that's how it goes. Even if mana already satisfied all their basic needs, wealth was an entirely different matter.

As I watched the night mountain going farther and farther away, I felt a magical signal behind me.

"So you were here."

"...yeah."

Looked like only Isaac came to check up on me. He seemed quite the earnest person.

He was holding two steaming copper cups. He handed one to me.

"...thanks." I said, receiving the cup.

He smiled and took a sip of his own drink. "No problem."

So players couldn't eat, but they could drink? For me, everything would need to go to **[Packer]** storage after a few pretend-swallows and disposed through Blobsy later.

Hmm... what was this stuff? Thick, green...

"...hot kale juice?" I murmured.

Isaac besides me spat out his own mouthful of 'hot kale juice'.

"Eww."

"Wait wait wait, hold up, what did you just say?"

"I mean, this stuff is..."

"It's spinach soup, for a midnight snack. Oh man, that was so out of left field. I never expected kale juice to also be a thing here."

"..."

I shouldn't have said that. Let's just gloss over the matter and drink the soup. As was my habit when I was still human, I started blowing on the hot cup. Isaac stared at me.

"So this isn't about the thing those two talked about earlier, but... Sherry, you really don't act like an NP-a native of this world."

"...you say that as if you're not a person of this world." I counterattacked.

"No, I mean..." Realizing his gaffe, Isaac stumbled on his words. Yet immediately after, a faint smile returned to his face.

He looked like he had just thought of a funny joke.

"Well then, what if this world was *fictional*? What would you do?"

"..."

So he was going for that. He believed that I was a programmed NPC living in a fictional world, who was completely ignorant of 'games'.

Maybe he thought he was just playing a little prank. Like telling a white lie to an innocent kid. All the same, I looked him in the eyes and fired his question back at him.

“In that case, if this world was real, what would you do?”

“Eh...?”

That took Isaac completely by surprise. A few moment of speechlessness later, he turned his eyes to the night scenery. He smiled.

“Then it’d be great. Just look at this view, this land. If we could visit this place, just the touring industry alone would bring in so much money. And if we could transport the resources here back, our problems would be solved. We could send our increasing population here, and utilize the cheap labor of this world...”

“...”

“Ah, sorry! I got lost in thought. I forgot it probably just sounded like gibberish to you.”

Midway through, he realized what he was saying and noticed my stare. He apologized.

He wasn’t a bad person. On Earth, he probably would be one of those successful, conscientious people you often see.

From Earth’s viewpoint, what he said wasn’t wrong. But that sort of thinking was no different from the humans here; Yggdrasia’s humans, who thought of demihumans as nothing more than just resources.

This was the moment I saw one of my choices closed itself forever to me right in front of my eyes. The choice of talking with the players. The path of *mutual understanding*.

Twelve days of borrowed time left.

We arrived at the Free City of Seis. As this was Isaac’s home country, he just needed to finish up a bit of paperwork to allow us in. Customs were *way* too loose. We rode a few more slow trains to get to a town to the north, where Isaac’s base was.

Just as with the Trading Confederation, the Free City of Seis was ruled neither by kings nor nobles. A council of merchants and the landowner made all the decisions.

The Trading Confederation was a country of merchants, for merchants. In contrast, the Free City of Seis put power into

adventurers and their guild.

I first thought we'd be going to the base after setting foot into the town. Turned out their friends came to meet us, and we'd be going to the meeting place for the 'party' next.

"Hey, who's that girl? The leader's hobby?!"

"Stop that, Sherry's my girl. I just can't get enough of her abuse these days..."

They noticed I wasn't a player and started teasing Isaac. And then for some reason, Weed asserted his ownership and his dangerous fetish.

Isaac's friends numbered around ten.

I guessed one of them had the magic stone. No way to determine who at the moment, though. And what if they already took it to the meeting place? Then revealing myself here would be a terrible idea.

According to their chatter, some of the more impatient people were already gathering there.

Apparently, the get-together would be held in the rural village that was near the large grassy plains to the north of Seis.

The plains was home to a kind of monster called 'behemoths', about as large as elephants. Their plan was to hunt the behemoths, raise their skills, and have fun while waiting for the 'bunny' to show up.

When we reached the village, I saw 5 parties of around 30 people already there. They were starting up the behemoth hunt.

Isaac's party looked through the crowd. When they reached a certain group, they all winced.

"...damn it, even the unwelcome ones came."

Once our group showed up, the other participants came by for peaceful greetings. Among the hunting parties, one wasn't actually *hunting*, instead only torturing the docile herbivores to death. And they were going toward us.

"...who are they?" I asked someone nearby.

The answer I got was an evasive one. “They’re... umm... well, they’re bad people, I suppose.”

In short, they were people roleplaying ‘villainous outlaws’. Characters who committed crime and were taken into custody would be deleted. On the flip side, as long as you weren’t arrested, playing as a bandit or thief wouldn’t be against the game’s rules.

Still, I felt like I’d already met that group somewhere...

“Hey, hey! So it’s first comes, first serve when the bunny shows up, yeah?”

“No, there’s a chance this is a quest chain. If possible, we should all help with capturing her. *Then* we’ll decide.”

“Who the fuck cares? Fucking hell, we should have gotten the airship pass back then if it wasn’t for that white fucker. If the bunny shows up, we’ll fuck that little shit up!”

...aaah, right, I remembered now. That time when I assimilated No. 01’s magic stone, there was a party trying to killsteal.

This guy was the leader of the party I killed last back then.

So they were still doing this sort of stuff, I see...

They were terrible people, but whatever. I needed to focus on finding out who had No. 08’s magic stone.

I began to fumble around with **[Cyber-Manipulation]**. While I was focusing on watching for any reactions from the players, suddenly, someone grabbed my hood from behind. I jolted.

“Why the hell’s an NPC kid here? Did you bring her in case the bunny doesn’t show up? Will we get to hunt the kid instead?” He cackled.

“Stop it! She’s an adventurer we hired!”

Tunnel vision. Damn it. There were too many players around, I didn’t detect the thuggish leader approaching.

Isaac panicked and tried to stop him. The thuggish leader took a look at him, and then exploded in another bout of laughter.

“What, did you buy her to service you? Man, this game really is the shit! I can even kill the slaves I bought and no one would even bat an eye!”

...he really was so annoying.

*

“...shut up already.” The NPC girl growled.

“Hahh?! The hell are you brat-aagh!!”

Just as the player holding her was about to turn to violence, two daggers slashed into his arms.

Cardi was his name. He wasn't so much a villainous roleplayer as he was simply *self-indulgent*. Infamously so, with myriads of complaints lodged against him. His words, his actions were all far beyond the pale. Yet still, as long as he wasn't violating the game's clauses, he was untouchable. If Isaac's group interfered, it would be *they* who were infringing upon the rules.

So they couldn't do anything. And it seemed like the NPC girl they brought along finally snapped.

The thug was still holding onto her hood even with wounded arms. So she tore it off herself and slashed at Cardi with terrifying speed. A strange coat of mist suddenly appeared on her, freezing the hooligan.

“D-Damn you!”

“Die already.” She said frostily. Her dagger bit deep into his face.

When players received overwhelming damage, their senses would be cut off to prevent traumas. But as he was, the sight of death staring in the face was more than enough to terrify Cardi.

With his face set in a rictus of fear, he disappeared in motes of light. The mist lightened by a fraction, no longer hiding the girl from the players' eyes.

They saw snow-white hair, scarlet eyes... and gently drooping *rabbit* ears.

The players were all frozen in shock at the abrupt reveal. Isaac let loose a whisper.

“...Sherry?”

Chapter 33 INTERLOPERS

“Sherry...?”

Isaac, sounding miles away, let slip a whisper.

My temper drove me to a short-sighted retaliation, and I inadvertently killed him. Still, I didn’t regret it.

Despite their plan, the players never thought I would actually show up. They gaped at my ears under the torn hood.

The corporation seeing me and making the link to the real *me* would be the worst case scenario here. Still, with only my face, I didn’t think they’d come to that conclusion right away. Especially when I now had rabbit ears.

So I tried to hide myself as much as I could. I was only keeping my current human form skin-deep. My insides were turning into mist, slowly covering the area.

Among the players, Isaac had the highest combat power. The lowest of them were about 300. The dangerous ones were Isaac’s clan members, who were all above 400. I readied a dagger, staying alert while wondering who among them had No. 08’s magic stone. Then Weed, recovered from his shock, frantically jumped out.

“Sherry is the bunny?! Awesome! I must have gotten so many relationship points already! Here, jump into my arms!”

Silence descended on the field.

What the *heck*? That was so far out of expectations, I couldn’t help but grimace.

On the other hand, Weed’s idiocy instead brought the players out of their stupor. “It’s the bunny!” “She’s really here!”

they clamored, hands moving to their weapons. Isaac frantically ran out in an attempt to stop them.

“No, stop! Let’s try talking with her first! Sherry, you-”

“HUNT THE BUNNY!!”

“””Yeeaahh!!”””

His plea was drowned out by the villainous leader’s party. They charged at me with weapons drawn.

“Too bad for Cardi! That five thousand large golds are gonna be all ours!”

“Don’t get too excited now! She can’t die!”

“Who cares, just throw potions at her and she’ll be fine! Chop off her arms and legs! Make sure she can’t run!”

Their combat power were about 300 to 400. They hadn’t grown much since the last time I met them.

My cloud of mist surged toward them, sapping their magic and heat, dulling their movements.

“W-wh-wha-what?!”

“M-m-my legs f-froze...”

I was already moving. I jabbed a dagger into the magician’s neck, threw another one at the archer’s, then turned around and tore apart the scout’s with my claws.

“W-What the hell is this!?”

A heavily-armored warrior was swinging his greataxe in wild abandon, his face close to tears. I focused my mist to freeze half of his body, then grabbed his face. My claws crushed the frozen head.

[Shedy] [Race: Mistral Neige] [Greater Demon (Low-Rank)]

☐The demon of tempestuous mist that ravages the northern seas. A canny spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 1975/2030] 80↑

[Total Combat Power: 2178/2233] 88↑

[Unique Skill: <Reroll> <Cyber-Manipulation> <Absorption>]

[Racial Skill: Fear]

[Simple Identification] [Humanoid Form (National Treasure)]
[Specialist Packer]

Just as I thought, two thousand magic wasn't enough for another rank-up.

Thirty seconds to kill them. These players had nothing more than some slapdash fighting skill, and just a bit of fear was enough to render them helpless. Honestly, they were weak. Those bodyguards at the auction were so much more troublesome.

The players had been unable to stop the battle from happening. And neither could they stop the following massacre. Even if none of them would call the dead their friends, the sight of such ruthless slaughter still unnerved them. A few players took a step back, faces pale.

Only the weak ones, however. The stronger players instead readied their weapons and charged. Perhaps they had managed to 'resist' my [Fear] .

"No!"

Isaac still tried to stop them. Sandra to his side, however, jumped out with her staff drawn and refuted.

"Isaac, enough already! Isn't it obvious? She's not a normal NPC, she's an event *raid boss*!"

I don't see what's so obvious about that.

So they believed NPCs stronger than them were for 'special events', then, and that hostile ones were 'bosses'.

Seemingly convinced, Isaac begrudgingly readied his own weapons.

"Alright, just be good now and let us capture you. [Ice Lance] !"

A magician woman fired out an enormous pillar of ice. I was pretty sure that thing was lethal, though? To humans, at least.

I was both weak to magic *and* lacking viable solutions to the problem. Retreat was my only choice. As I leaped back, an archer some distance away shot an arrow.

“[Shadow Bind] !”

Magicians and archers really were my worst enemies. Still, as long as I knew what was coming, it wasn't all that difficult to deal with.

I threw out my torn coat. The strange skill hit its shadow.

“What the hell?!”

The coat froze in mid-air. I dashed out from the side, toward the archer. A nimble shadow jumped in and blocked my path.

“Lovely Sherry! Come, my arms long for you-uff!”

Whoops. I was supposed to use my dagger here, but for some reason I *really* wanted to kick his face in. So I did.

Weed staggered back. I left his feet frozen, then threw the chilly mist at the retreating archer. A player holding a greatshield intervened, blocking it.

The shielder wasn't freezing? Was it another strange art? Or maybe they were being buffed with a spell.

This was why I hated fighting player groups. They could cover each other's weaknesses with their special skills. I had much higher combat power, yet I still hadn't managed to kill anyone.

Whoa?! I just felt something invisible trying to bind me, so I immediately jumped away. Some distance away, standing isolated was a pink-haired girl swinging a *huge* hammer. She shouted.

“Leader! Isn't she supposed to have only 200 combat power? How did she resist [Slow] ?!”

“Idiot! You're not supposed to be fighting!” Sandra, instead of the leader Isaac, rebuked the girl. My status smokescreen was still working, then. Good.

So the strange cloying feeling back then was the girl's spell? But why did she get scolded just for attacking? Because she was a magician? But wasn't she holding a big hammer and even wearing a leather chestplate over her robe?

...wait a minute...

I ignored the shielder and rushed straight toward her. Both she and Sandra immediately began panicking.

“Ah! You idiot, see what happened?! She’s heading for you now!”

“Wasn’t it because you were shouting?! Sally, *you’re* the idiot!”

So there really was a reason why they didn’t want me to reach her. For example... maybe she was holding No. 08’s magic stone?

In trying to protect pink-head, the coordination of Isaac’s clan members began to fray.

All of them had at least 400 combat power. Half of them, people who had around 700 combat power like Sandra and Weed, lost the space they needed to move freely. They could no longer cover for their comrades.

“Alright, gotcha!”

A sword-and-buckler warrior charged in. I dodged the slow-motion slash and froze his right arm.

“Waaahh!?”

“I’ll help you!”

Lowest pain setting, I see... His comrade, an archer, shot an arrow to cover for him. I hid behind the warrior, then threw out my frosty mist to drain both their lives dry.

Downing two players in a blink of an eye was plenty enough to frighten the players. On one hand, them losing their calm was a good thing for me. On the other, it also meant they were no longer holding back. No longer fighting to capture.

“**[Fire Bolt] !**”

Sandra’s fireball erupted, torching the grassland.

[Shedy] [Race: Mistral Neige] [Greater Demon (Low-Rank)]

[Magic Points: 1935/2060] 30↑

[Total Combat Power: 2141/2266] 33↑

I dodged in desperation. Still quite damaging, despite the higher defense that came with my higher combat power.

“Sandrea!”

“Look, she’s too dangerous! We can’t win if we hold back here!”

“It’s our turn! [Shield Charge]!”

He rushed at me, his greatshield to the front. He wanted to launch me away? Too bad for him.

“Wha?!”

I didn’t budge. With his charge parried, I grabbed and froze his shield-holding arm. Having three times his combat power really helped out here.

“Stop!”

I instantly jumped back the moment I noticed the glint of a sword. Isaac was pointing his blade at me.

“Are you okay?”

“S-sorry.”

I could only take half of his magic and life.

Pink-head shot out a white light to the shieldbearer, releasing him from the ice. Then he emptied a small bottle into his mouth.

Huh. I just felt his magic recovering.

Round two, then... Fighting head-on would be disadvantageous for me. At least their potions weren’t infinite. If I focused on maintaining my magic and deal with them one by one, I’d still have a chance.

As long as there was an opportunity to steal No. 08’s magic stone, I’d win.

Everyone, except for the dead, had completely recovered with their potions. I cast aside my errant thoughts and refocused, daggers in both

hands, readying myself with a few hops. My ears jiggled.

No one was playing around now. Even Weed looked tense, sword in hand. Isaac got ready to give the signal.

At that moment, a chorus of ear-splitting shrills rang out.

“W-what now?”

“What’s this buzzing...”

Pitch-black monsters began to appear, staining the green grassland like a spreading puddle of tar.

“What... is that...?” A player muttered. Their smile was forced, their voice brittle.

The newcomers were huge, two-meters tall and five-meters wide tarantula-shaped monsters, with claws and carapaces of a crab.

“Eh-aaarghh!”

“Shit, they’re attacking us?!”

Their sizes belied their speed. A nearby player was already torn in half by their claws.

I knew them... no, not me. No. 01 and No. 17’s knowledge inside me *knew* of them, of their possible existence.

[Black Carapace Spiders x10]

[Magic Points: 300/300] [Hit Points: 500/500]

[Total Combat Power: 1000]

They’re experimental monster avatars driven by *secret beta testers*!

Chapter 34 EXPERIMENTAL MILITARIZED MONSTER AVATARS

“Deputy Director!”

Audrey opened the door of the room formerly used for monitoring the 100 secret alpha testers. Inside, the Deputy Director of the 7th research center, Brian, and several staff members were watching a screen.

“Heeey, Audrey. A bit late, aren’t you?” He cheerfully greeted.

It had been a week since the beginning of the activation test of the militarized monster avatar mass-production models.

Fifty physically and mentally resilient soldiers of the Army were chosen to be the ‘secret beta testers’.

The new experimental models had been fine-tuned based on the valuable data gained from the secret alpha testers.

Extraneous functions, including evolution, were removed. The precious mana gathered by beta testers had given them a head start in power.

“Looks like it’s gonna be tough for the testers to get acclimatized with the avatars if we infuse any more mana. I suppose in the end, nothing beats gathering mana yourself to increase your power. But then again, what if we need to use those things here...”

“Deputy Director Brian, why are you mobilizing the experimental models?”

“Oh, this? Well, seeing your fixation with the so-called ‘bunny girl’ made me curious too. Man, I knew you were hired for a reason! Just as you expected, the bunny was after the magic stone. The player event managed to lure her out.”

The secretary woman’s face turned a tad pale.

A rabbit beastman girl with an uncanny similarity to No. 13. Audrey had looked into the heist of No. 17's magic stone, and had come to the same conclusion as the players. So she connected her mobile device to one of the monitoring screens and sent a watcher drone to observe the players who planned the event.

And just as she thought, the rabbit beastman girl took the bait, and a fight had broken out. Yet suddenly, the experimental models showed up and started attacking everyone there, when they were supposed to be still in the middle of a test run far away from any human civilization.

“Man, gotta say, that world really is wide. I never expected there could be a single lone beastman who could fight at that level. Identifications returned some weird numbers, but if she could fight like that, don't you think she'd make for a great *performance test* for the militarized monster avatars? They were made to kill people, after all.”

“But shouldn't we be keeping them out of the players' eyes...?”

“Oh, it's not any different from the previous 'berserker' event. Besides, that bunny stole the magic stone from No. 17, and now she's trying to get No. 08's. Two out of our original three testers had dropped magic stones, so why didn't No. 01...?”

No. 13 was next to him that time, right? If, just as you said, that bunny truly had a connection to No. 13, wouldn't that be so *interesting*?”

Since when did he know Audrey was looking into the rabbit? She thought she saw something *twisted* in Brian's cheerful smile. She said nothing, her own expression stiff.

“Well then. Let's see how much of a fight the bunny and the players can give against real soldiers in experimental models.”

“What the hell are those monsters?!”

“Are they event monsters too?!”

“Everyone, calm down!”

“Total combat power is 1000?! And *ten* of them?!”

“Archers, keep them in check...”

“Damn it, there are way too many of them!”

A carapace-spider dipped low, then sent its entire body weight into an upward smash.

“Whoaa!?”

It was more than the greatshield-holder could take. He went flying, despite his combat power nearing 800. I didn’t think that bit of difference in combat power could blow him off so easily, so it must be the mass difference. And the spiders knew it too; the way they fought was centered around leveraging their weight.

“**[Shadow Bind]**!”

“**[Ice Lance]**!”

An archer pinned down a spider, and a magician froze one of its legs. But immediately, the other carapace-spiders moved forward to cover for it. Their claws pierced an approaching warrior.

The restrained spider opened up its crab-claws. From within, rock bullets shot out, aiming at the magicians staying farther away.

“Aaaaaaagh!”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me... monsters are using **[Stone Bullet]** ?!”

The mobility and agility of a wolf. The toughness of a tank. Possessing both close-range attacks and magical capabilities.

Despite personal combat power not all that much higher, they were still massacring the players one after another, without getting so much as a scratch.

I wasn’t just watching from the side. I was already busy with five of the spiders.

“Oof!”

I jumped back to dodge a downward claw, but another spider was already going around to my position. It swung its leg. I ducked, expelling mist as a smokescreen and jumped out of the encirclement.

The very moment I landed, a rock burst apart at my feet. As I struggled to reclaim my balance, a spider charged in.

“Damn it!”

I froze and shattered the grass under me. The cloud of plant fragments obscured its sight for a moment, and I took the chance to stab my dagger into its head.

“...tsk.”

The dagger tip chipped off. Seemed like I dealt some damage with that, at least, but not enough to slow it down any.

I put some distance between us. The spiders didn’t continue their assault. They simply moved to surround me, weaving their net.

I had around double their combat power, so I was still managing to deal with their coordinated attacks... no. That wasn’t right. They were *playing* with me.

Like a pack of wolves hunting a moose. Once their prey weakened, the alpha wolf would turn the hunt into a lesson for the other wolves. And this fight was no different. The spiders were just tormenting me.

[Shedy] [Race: Mistral Neige] [Greater Demon (Low-Rank)]

☐The demon of tempestuous mist that ravages the northern seas. A canny spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 1870/2060]

[Total Combat Power: 2076/2266]

[Unique Skill: <Reroll> <Cyber-Manipulation> <Absorption>]

[Racial Skill: Fear]

[Simple Identification] [Humanoid Form (National Treasure)]
[Specialist Packer]

I was being ground down. At least their own magic were going down, too, due to their attacks. Still, if Isaac's group went down, the spiders over there would come and gang up on me.

I apologized to Isaac in my thoughts. I didn't have the leeway to come help them, but I still needed them to survive until I've killed at least a few spiders.

I supposed this wasn't the time to be holding back, then.

The spiders were still slowly circling me, tightening their net. I threw the two daggers in my hands upward. Their movements hitched by a fraction.

Immediately, I shot toward the target I had in mind. It stalled for a instant, then moved backwards and started shooting rocks.

Just as I thought. Their connections to their avatars were weaker than us secret alpha testers. And my target had been favoring ranged magical attacks over close-quarters combat since the beginning.

I dodged the rocks I already knew were coming. Before the other spiders arrived, I dispersed both my arms and clung to its top.

One of its leg gouged out my stomach. I paid it no mind. As I began to freeze and absorb its life force, the neighboring spider approached and swung its giant claws.

[Reroll] [Reroll]

The claws whiffed past my face, then proceeded to pierce through the carapace of the half-frozen spider. I jabbed my own claws into the hole in the shell and absorb the rest of its magic and lifeforce.

"Kkrrrr..."

It was the first time a spider so much as *said* anything, and it was also its last. As my target disappeared in motes of light, I jumped to the neighboring spider. The accidental friendly-fire had immobilized it for a few short moments. I immediately began absorption.

It returned to its senses and started rampaging. Quite violently too, since I hadn't frozen this one. On the other hand, the other spiders weren't coming any closer.

[Reroll] **[Reroll]** **[Reroll]** **[Reroll]** **[Reroll]**

Every time I felt like I was about to fall, I **[Reroll]** ed to keep myself on it. I sucked it dry in one go.

Another spider began shooting magic at me.

[Cyber-Manipulation] **[Reroll]**

I forced a success of **[Cyber-Manipulation]** with **[Reroll]** . **[Fear]** suddenly descended on the shooting spider, and its aim turned indiscriminate.

The remaining two spiders were calmly dealing with the situation. They restrained the terrified spider from both sides. As they did, the bound spider started to fade away. A forced logout? Immediately, I shot my dispersed arms to one of the two restraining spiders, the one on the right. I stabbed my claws inside a gap on its shell and began absorbing its magic.

The left spider smashed its claws into me, flinging me off.

“Ooof!”

At least I managed to drain dry my target. Still, that was too much damage.

[Shedy] **[Race: Mistral Neige]** **[Greater Demon (Low-Rank)]**

[Magic Points: 1475/2240] 180↑

[Total Combat Power: 1699/2464] 198↑

I lost a bunch of magic. I could still fight, just not as recklessly. Otherwise this would turn into a losing battle in a blink of an eye.

I and the remaining spider entered a staring contest for a few seconds.

Then it left, joining its comrades in fighting Isaac's clan.

I really wanted to retreat here, but I couldn't afford to let the magic stone fall into the hands of the corporation.

So I instantly gave chase. Looked like Isaac's clan managed to down one of the spiders, too, but they paid for it with half their members. They had over twenty people at the beginning of the battle, and now their numbers didn't even reach ten.

The spider from my side regrouped with the other four, repairing their formation.

"Sherry!"

As I arrived, Isaac's group turned to face me. And so did the carapace-spiders.

I would really like to complain about the fact that both sides were more wary of me, here.

Isaac, battered and bruised but with weapon still firmly held, asked.

"Sherry... these crab-spiders aren't your friends, right?"

"...no."

"I see... then, do you want to join up until they're dead, first?"

"Isaa-mmmfph!" Sandra cut in, but didn't get to say anything before pink-head muffled her.

"...even when you look so worn-out?"

"Heh, aren't you about the same, Sherry?"

The players were avatars, so they were still standing on their own legs, but their wounds hadn't completely healed.

Looked like they ran out of potions. Their armor and weapons were all torn and cracked, too.

My glance swept through all of them. I quietly put out my hand.

"Give me the red magic stone. Then I'll kill them for you."

"...magic stone?"

Isaac looked dubiously at me. Even if I could only recover my magic, it should still be enough.

“Wha-mmmfgrh!”

Again, Sandra was about to shout out something when pink-head held her down. Pinkie reprimanded her in a lecturing tone.

“Sally, be quiet. This is most likely a required *condition*,” she turned to Isaac, “I think it’s fine, but what do you think, leader?”

Isaac hesitated for a few moments. He looked at me one more time, then nodded to pink-head.

“Here.”

Pink-head threw the red magic stone to me.

No doubt about it. This was No. 08’s magic stone.

Apparently pink-head thought this was a necessary ‘condition’ to trigger the next step of their quest. But that wasn’t quite right.

This was a ‘condition’ necessary for my *way of life*.

I popped the stone into my mouth without hesitation. As it dissolved inside me, my magic began to rapidly stir, perhaps because all three magic stones were now together.

Hot... like I was burning up. I felt as if my body was heavier, yet at the same time lighter from the overflowing power coursing through me.

I...

[Shedy] [Race: Mistral Neige] [Greater Demon (High-Rank)]

☐The demon of tempestuous mist that ravages the northern seas. A canny spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 4000/4000] 1760↑

[Total Combat Power: 4400/4400] 1936↑

[Unique Skill: <Reroll> <Cyber-Manipulation> <Absorption> <Materialization>]

[Racial Skill: Fear]

[Simple Identification] [Human Form (Wonderful)] [Specialist Packer]

I was Ranking-up...?

Chapter 35 EVENT CONCLUSION

No. 08's legacy, the final magic stone, had elevated me to a higher rank of existence.

The same thing happened when I assimilated No. 17's magic stone. I skipped the rank-up process entirely, while still gaining the appropriate magic power.

[Shedy] [Race: Mistral Neige] [Greater Demon (High-Rank)]

☐The demon of tempestuous mist that ravages the northern seas. A canny spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 4000/4000] 1760↑

[Total Combat Power: 4400/4400] 1936↑

[Unique Skill: <Reroll> <Cyber-Manipulation> <Absorption> <Materialization>]

[Racial Skill: Fear]

[Simple Identification] [Human Form (Wonderful)] [Specialist Packer]

...well, let's leave the nitpicking for next time. Basically, I gained a ton of magic and combat power.

However, the most drastic change came from the new power I gained from No. 08: **[Materialization]**.

Before, my human form was just a paper-thin, weightless veneer. Now, I had gained real flesh and blood, crafted from matter of this world.

My body handled a bit differently from before. To be honest, I thought

a body with actual substance and weight was easier to use. I curled and flexed my fingers, trying to get a feel for my new self.

“...Sherry? Is that you?” I heard Weed calling from somewhere, bewilderment in his voice.

I grew up again. I looked around 13 now, about 150 centimeters tall. Ten centimeters taller than when I first got these clothes, which meant my navel would peek out from below the hem of my blouse whenever I moved, and my knee-length skirt was pretty much a miniskirt now.

Kids this age grew up so quickly, they could gain an adult’s face in just a single year. Isaac, staring at me in amazement, came back to himself as he heard Weed’s utterance. Just as he was about to speak...

clang!

My dagger flew into the head of a spider in a corner of my view, discouraging whatever it was about to do. The iron blade sank half-way into its shell and broke off.

So just normal iron wouldn’t be able to stand up to the spider’s carapace or my current power, then.

Now, I only needed to create a bit of mist in order to gain a full view of the surroundings. I continued examining myself, while still keeping watch on the carapace-spiders.

The spiders had been watching me, too, noticing my change. But not any more; they began to move. I responded with a quiet step forward.

Just as I passed by Isaac, mouth still agape and standing stock-still, I spoke.

“...my name’s Shedy. Not Sherry.”

“Eh...” He jolted in another bout of surprise.

I leaped, my step blasting away a patch of grassland and bringing me to point-blank range with a spider in an instant. The vigilant spiders immediately scattered and began firing magical bullets from all sides.

Mist burst out from me, weaving itself into a cloak to hide me from sight. Its winding tendrils wrapped around my target.

The range and thickness of my mist had improved by leaps and bounds. Once the mist cleared, the spider under me was nothing more than a frozen statue, wasting away as grains of light.

Two spiders instantly began shooting again, while two other slid around me, swiping their claws in a pincer attack.

I stretched my cloak of mist into a thin fog, sapping *heat* from the surroundings.

Everything moving needed energy, whether they were living beings, machinery, or avatars. And where there was kinetic energy, there was heat. Not like I particularly understood how it worked, anyway.

Their movements rapidly dulled. I latched onto one of them, freezing the shell whole and shattering it with my claws. I drained it dry of magic.

The three remaining spiders decided to abandon close-quarters combat. They tried to escape the mist, their guns still firing to suppress me.

But I didn't actually need the chilly mist to slow them down. My speed was doubled with the explosive boost in combat power I gained.

The magical rock bullets now looked no faster than lobbed basketballs. I just needed a light hop to the left, then to the right... oh hey, I think I could catch those.

So I did. Thankfully they weren't shooting fireballs instead. I grabbed a boulder in mid-air and put all my strength into a return throw. It didn't even come close to hitting any of them, but the sight was still enough to shock a spider into a moment of indecision. I clung to it, freezing, stabbing, draining its magic.

The moment my target was down, the other two suddenly stopped moving. They restarted a short while later, but this time, their movements were strangely mechanical.

What happened? Did they changed to using AI controllers? I didn't quite get their intentions. If all they wanted was just a simple, indiscriminate massacre, then an AI would probably work just fine. But using soldiers with predictable attack patterns against me? They wouldn't even be worth worrying about.

I baited them out, dodged their attacks, then froze them directly with both my hands. The last two spiders died without much fanfare.

“...pew.”

The spiders weren't much of a problem. If anything, they caused more trouble to Isaac's group than to me.

Most of the participants were dead, and the rest were beaten within an inch of their lives. I supposed that to them, their planned event couldn't have gone any worse.

I sent them a glance. Several players shook off their shock and readied their weapons when they noticed my gaze. Isaac and Weed looked like they wanted to say something. Sandra, who used to be such a chatterbox when we were talking about the magic stone, was now glaring at me in silence. She seemed frustrated.

...well, whatever. Not like I needed to be friends with them, anyway. And it'd be better off for them if they stayed away from scary *monsters*, too.

If anything, I was more curious about the secret beta testers. Why were they here?

Had the corporation discovered the link between me and my real-life body? If so, then my allotted time was rapidly running out.

Twelve days of borrowed time left.

This deadline must still hold true. I won't give up. Not ever.

I left the players behind me and headed toward my final target: the World Tree.

“...I swear, I'm going to make her call me Sally next time we meet!”

...she was *still* going on about that? No way, not in a million years.

One day, on a popular video sharing website, a certain video was uploaded by players of *World of Yggdrasia*, the VRMMORPG that was still in beta. It immediately blew up.

A rabbit beastman girl who looked about 13 years of age. The value of the in-game bounty for her capture was equivalent to fifty million real-life dollars.

Fluffy snow-white hair, vivid-red eyes, adorably drooping rabbit ears, and a cute face to boot. It didn't take long for the video to hit a million views.

Footage showing the black spiders were cut out of the site immediately after uploading, for some reason, but the scenes of her battle against the players were intact. The viewers weren't scared by her ruthless cruelty; if anything, it only caused her popularity to skyrocket. Both the beta players and the people waiting for the official release worldwide were infatuated with her. They called her the 'Fluffy Bunny'.

Another video uploaded by a player named Weed with the title "Collection of Glares and Roasts" also gained a huge amount of views. More and more people expressed a desire to be insulted by the bunny. Even a rumor was born, that one would be blessed with good luck if one ever met her in-game. Some were already discussing fan-made figurines.

The only one unaware was the rabbit herself.

"...hah. Hahahah, AAAAHAHAH! Man, what the hell is this?! They were experimental, sure, but wiped out by just a single girl?!" Deputy Director Brian cackled, his eyes on the monitor.

His laugh turned Audrey's stomach. Still, she spoke. "...D-Deputy Director?"

Even she could not have predicted this outcome. The avatars might have been experimental models, but they already had proven themselves to possess power equivalent to that of modern light tanks. The girl certainly had some trouble in the beginning, yet once she

acquired the magic stone, she dealt with five of the experimental models in an instant.

The few drones currently chasing after her had already been shot down. Her whereabouts was unknown.

“The last two avatars got the data, right? Begin upgrading the militarized monster avatars with that right now! Throw versatility out the door, we just need to hunt the rabbit. Oh man, I can’t *wait* to dissect that girl!” Brian ordered, sounding extremely upbeat.

Then his twisted grin turned to Audrey.

“Audrey, you’re the best secretary ever! I could kiss you just for finding that *wonderful* tester for us! Alright, I’ve got another job for you. Go check on the vital signs of No. 13 in the collection facility. We’ll be cornering the rabbit soon, so if the girl showed *any* reactions at all, tell me immediately. I’ll dissect her myself!”

“...understood.”

Audrey thought she caught a glimpse of insanity within his eyes. Still, she bowed, looking like the model subordinate.

Just a few days later, development of the militarized monster avatars specialized for the rabbit was done. Their designation was MO-03-B. Fifty soldiers of the Army were participating in Operation: Rabbit Season.

Chapter 36 PATH TO THE WORLD TREE

Nine days of borrowed time left.

I was finally on my way to the World Tree, in order to find a way to save my soul back on Earth.

I had to wonder if there really was a way... No. 01 had believed in the faint possibility, and he said as much in his testament. Yet that was no guarantee of salvation.

...at least a bit of hope was better than nothing.

According to the travel guide I read on the airship, there were two possible paths from the Free City of Seis to the World Tree.

I could continue south and pass through Cinqres Academy City, get on a ship to go to the Holy City Ayune, then cross a bit more land and sea to reach the Central Island, where the World Tree was.

The other path was similar. I could go by airship from Seis to Ayune, and the rest would be the same.

The Central Island was surrounded by a donut-shaped mountain range. The only way in was through the Holy City Ayune, which was why both paths required me to go there.

And it was also the most problematic part of the journey.

According to the guidebook, Ayune was the country closest to the World Tree, and at the same time housing the headquarters of the religion revering the Tree. So it must also be the main base of the corporation that was playing God to this world. It would be the most dangerous place in the world for me... and I even heard rumors of 'Heroes' there, too.

Besides, that mess with the beta players made it a lot more difficult for me to use public transportation in the first place. If I entered a large town and got discovered, the resulting complications would waste more of my time than simply taking a detour.

So I decided to take the third path: moving by myself.

I would head south toward the peninsula to the western end of Cinqres, cross the ocean by my own power, climb the steep mountain wall surrounding the Central Island, and head directly to the World Tree.

I should be able to make the distance... probably. According to the rough map I saw, at least.

I dealt with the watcher drones tailing me and went south, detouring around towns when necessary.

Within territories that looked like they belonged to humans, I stayed in my human form. Once I escaped the area surrounding the Free City, I could finally turn back to mist.

It wasn't like there were no downsides to having a body with substance. The biggest disadvantage was that I had lost the ability to

partially transform. I could only either be completely mist or completely human.

When dispersed, I became almost completely immune to physical attacks, and absorption would work a lot faster. On the other hand, my own attacks would lack weight, and area-of-effect spells could hurt me badly.

When in human form, I could deal out *heavy* strikes and change position rapidly, which made dodging spells relatively easier. But physical attacks would hurt me more, my detection range would shrink by a bit, and the most annoying thing was that I could no longer use **[Packer]** when human. I would have to take what I needed out of my inventory beforehand.

I gained the ability to create mist while human, too, so there wasn't much of a difference between freezing things in mist form or in human form. And while my human form was better at short-ranged, instantaneous movements, my mist form was much faster at traveling long distance or going through wastelands.

So once I left the lands of humans, I immediately changed back into mist. My speed was probably around the same as an ordinary train's.

Might as well take the occasion to confirm my power.

[Shedy] [Race: Mistral Neige] [Greater Demon (High-Rank)]

☐The demon of tempestuous mist that ravages the northern seas. A canny spiritual lifeform.

[Magic Points: 4300/4300] 300↑

[Total Combat Power: 4730/4730] 330↑

[Unique Skill: <Reroll> <Cyber-Manipulation> <Absorption> <Materialization>]

[Racial Skill: Fear]

[Simple Identification] [Human Form (Wonderful)] [Specialist Packer]

With the acquisition of **[Materialization]**, **[Humanoid Form]** turned into **[Human Form]**. I wasn't just looking like a human; I had gained a real body, one that was practically the same as when I was

still a normal human, only more grown-up.

My voice was no longer simply me messing with pockets of air. I was truly *breathing* now, even if I was actually breathing mana, not oxygen.

In the beginning, I could recover only ten percent of my magic each hour. With the combination of **[Absorption]** and **[Materialization]**, that number had jumped to thirty percent.

Yet all that did not excuse the use of (Wonderful) to describe me... just what the hell was it assessing? I agreed, **[Human Form]** was really quite wonderful, but *still!*

So my body was almost indistinguishable from a real human's now, but the rabbit ears were still staying... unsurprisingly.

Honestly, I was halfway to complete resignation by now. Weird, isn't it? My brain was supposed to be taking over the job of the System these days, yet I was only evolving in the oddest ways.

Maybe I should just embrace the inevitable already... might as well find myself a bunny suit, in that case.

Anyway, that was about it. From now on, I'd need to learn how to fight with both forms, and how to use them in the right situation.

Three days after I went south from Seis, I finally began to see traces of what looked like human civilization in a forest, so I turned human again.

Whenever I turn human, first, I needed to throw out my clothes and satchel from **[Packer]** inventory. The moment they appear, I would slip my body of mist into the outfit and change form. Clothed human transformation, in effect.

It took me half a day to learn how to do this... god, so much precious time lost. But this was *important*. I would never allow myself to forget wearing clothes!

Personal dignity aside, once I started putting one foot after another on solid ground, Blobsy immediately jumped out from my satchel. She hauled herself onto my shoulder, then jiggled in joy.

Cute. I took some jerky from my satchel, fed Blobsy her snack, and

began running. My sprint was as fast as a cheetah's now.

The Academy City of Cinqres was supposed to be nearby. Apparently the country was gathering elite students and researchers from all over the world to do... something.

I only turned human as insurance. I had no plans to get anywhere close to the country. The people there must be doing mana research by orders of the corporation, so I expected heavy surveillance. Which meant I shouldn't be showing my mist form here. I didn't want to allow for the possibility of them realizing my link to No. 13.

Well, I had a feeling they already had an inkling of my identity, though... whoa!

The moment I exited the forest, I noticed a watcher drone. I immediately blasted mist from my fingers to freeze it.

I could now expel mist in human form, in exchange for the ability to partially transform. This mist was both me, yet not me. It moved according to my will, but it also had some similarities to spells in that it consumed my magic power.

In the end, it might not sound like much of a distinction. But the important thing here was that if an attack hit the mist, it would only cost me the magical expense of the lost mist. I wouldn't need to worry about the attack seriously hurting me.

Well, my real body of mist would be able to do absorption a lot faster, though.

Just as I thought, once I left the forest and got closer to the country, I began to see a lot more of those watcher drones.

They hadn't found me yet. All the same, the corporation would be suspecting something was wrong once they noticed dozens of drones breaking down in the same region within just a few days.

I should be able to reach the peninsula if I turned west here. I focused my eyes on what I hoped to be the right direction.

There, so far away, I saw the shadow of a mountain. A silhouette robed in fog, foot resting upon the ocean.

...it was the right direction, then. As I got ready to leave-

“Whoa?!”

-I suddenly detected multiple magical signals. I promptly leaped away.

Ratatatataat!!!

The ground where I used to stand on *exploded*, blowing away my cloak of mist.

What was that?! I recreated my mist, checking out my surroundings. Strange monsters were surrounding me. I never even noticed.

They were colored black, with torsos and wings of a cricket and spindly spider legs.

[Cricket Spider x15]

[Magic Points: 475/500] [Hit Points: 750/750]

[Total Combat Power: 1750]

More secret beta testers?! Different avatars, but much stronger this time.

As I attempted escape from the encirclement, they gave chase, lanky spider legs running like a horse. God, that looked disgusting! And fast too, at that!

I created even more mist to hide myself. Several cricket spiders opened their mouths, wings vibrating at high-speed.

Invisible projectiles shot at me.

**Ratatat! **

So this was what they ambushed me with!

Exploding bullets of wind. No direct hits, yet my mist was still blown away. Were they spells? They actually hurt me.

These monster avatars were purely long-range combatants, and their focus was on raw speed rather than agility. Their aim must be to keep me away from melee range, then... how troublesome. The moment I moved, the whole encirclement followed. But that didn't mean I was

helpless...

I dashed toward one of them, my step gouging out the earth.

They all promptly retreated. Still, I didn't have over 4000 combat power for nothing. My superior acceleration blasted me past my target, and my claws ripped it apart from head to wings. Frost spread from its wounds to turn it into a popsicle.

They were a lot softer than the carapace spiders! I could do this!

Then, just as I got ready to leap toward my next target, it jumped. It began to hover in mid-air, wings flapping.

It wasn't true flight. It was slowly descending, but I still couldn't reach it.

Ratttatatata!!!

A rain of explosive wind bullets came from the other cricket spiders.

[Shedy] [Race: Mistral Neige] [Greater Demon (High-Rank)]

[Magic Points: 3860/4380] 80↑

[Total Combat Power: 4290/4810] 80↑

That really hurt. I rolled away, dodging the projectiles. I attempted a dash toward the nearest target, but again, it immediately jumped up. More bullets came.

My suspicions were confirmed. They couldn't fire in rapid succession, and there weren't that many bullets in each salvo.

The damage wasn't that bad.

Still, this couldn't continue. I weaved around the hail of bullets with rapid dashes. An idea came to mind, and I immediately froze the ground.

Yes! One of them got stuck on the ice-covered earth. I instantly changed direction. Before the other cricket spiders could do anything, I tore it apart with claws and dagger, then drained it dry of magic.

Ratatatat!!!

A sudden hail of bullets rained down, blowing away both me and my target.

[Shedy] [Race: Mistral Neige] [Greater Demon (High-Rank)]

[Magic Points: 3440/4460] 80↑

[Total Combat Power: 3880/4900] 90↑

At least they were killable. Still, they had the advantage, and it was only going to get worse for me. I should try to repeat this a few more times. Hopefully I could get rid of another one—My thoughts stalled as I witnessed the cricket spiders releasing their encirclement. They stepped back, then faded into nonexistence.

“...huh?”

...did they log out? What’s going on?

At least this was better than the alternative. Continuing that fight would have just left me worse off. I departed the area and continued toward the direction of the World Tree.

After that first encounter, their assaults became a regular occurrence. Yet the battles always ended in their retreat, even when they still hadn’t lost.

I see... so they were returning to refuel the magic consumed when they shot those explosive wind bullets. That was just unfair.

After another three days of constant battles, I finally crossed the peninsula. I could see the sea now.

[Shedy] [Race: Mistral Neige] [Greater Demon (High-Rank)]

[Magic Points: 2750/4620] 160↑

[Total Combat Power: 3210/5080] 180↑

Across the ocean was a craggy mountain range, towering over a thousand meters. Yet behind it was an even bigger tree. A green colossus, sharing home with the clouds.

“The World Tree...”

Author's Notes: The secret beta testers' avatars were controlled semi-automatically.



If defeated, a few hours of calibration and refueling magic would return them back to combat-readiness.

TN: Bigger sized map [here](#).

Chapter 37 CONTRACT

Surrounded by the towering mountain range was a green giant several times larger.

Just how enormous was it...? While the air here was certainly a lot cleaner than Earth's, I still could not believe I was actually seeing the silhouette of a tree thousands of kilometers away.

The World Tree... together with the ninety-nine saplings, they served as the cornerstones of this world.

...wait, no, this wasn't the time to be admiring scenery. That 'thousands of kilometers' was exactly what I must cross.

Ratatatat!!

"Not again!"

More explosive wind bullets appeared out of nowhere. I promptly dashed away.

The militarized monster avatars, driven by secret beta testers, showed themselves. Five black cricket-spiders galloped after me on their eight legs, shooting their spells all the while.

It had been twenty-four hours since my first encounter with the cricket-spiders. They never stopped attacking. Every time they ran out of magic and left, they would return a few hours after. Or just ten minutes, if luck was being particularly uncharitable.

They would just revive if I killed them. They weren't getting the penalty to their magic like normal beta players, but they should still be losing the amount I drained from them. Yet to the contrary, it seemed their magic was even slightly increasing. Perhaps they were taking turns killing monsters or humans somewhere else.

Even when I was recovering thirty percent every hour, it still wasn't enough. My current magic was already down to half capacity.

I really couldn't afford to keep fighting them. I stayed as human and ran toward the sea.

I was ‘ *the demon of tempestuous mist that ravages the northern seas*’, so I could cross the ocean just fine if I turned to mist here. But with the threat of wind bullets looming behind me, I didn’t dare.

Flight as a human was possible too, but keeping it up for long hours would be rough on me, plus I’d lose a lot of my maneuverability. So I decided to just *run* on the water.

The mist from my feet froze the waves with each step I took.

Not very stable footing, but it would suffice. I kept up my speed. Their attempts to follow me ended in shattered ice and drowning spiders.

Really... were they even using their eyes? Why did they think my ice could support their weight?

Six days of borrowed time left.

Considering I’d have to cross the ocean, the mountain range, then another strip of ocean to reach the Central Island where the World Tree was, I was cutting it really close.

I kept on running on the frozen path for a whole day and night. As I expected, the sea had stopped any further attacks.

Still, I had to constantly create mist, so I didn’t recover all that much magic.

Perhaps I should just accept the loss of secrecy and go all-out as flying mist? I couldn’t decide. Especially when there were still drones watching me from beyond my attack range even now.

A giant shark attacked me on the way. I kept up my speed, leaving behind a sinking frozen fish.

Four days of borrowed time left.

I could finally see the shore. The regions around the World Tree and its Saplings generally had mild climate and an abundance of greenery, yet the mountains here had nothing but precipitous cliffs, its rock face permitting no life.

“Damn it!”

So this was why the secret beta testers didn’t attack me on the ocean.

They were setting up an ambush here! Over forty cricket spiders were occupying the relatively more level areas of the shoreline, waiting for my arrival.

The ten foremost spiders fired their wind bullets in unison. I immediately stopped creating mist and dove into the ocean.

I supposed it wasn't time to worry about keeping secrets, then...

With the full strength of my magic, I carved out an enormous chunk of frozen ocean to throw at them. They immediately blew it apart. I fully transformed into mist, blasting through the ice fragments and their ambush. I left behind several spider popsicles as I began climbing the mountain.

But there was a surprise waiting for me. A surprise that, I was convinced, was also unknown to the secret beta testers.

There was a reason why no one ever reached the World Tree without following the official path. The mountains itself *rejected* all intruders.

Of the secret alpha testers, the survivors with broken psyches were being kept and monitored in a separate facility. The comatose children were lying still within fifty-seven suspended animation capsules. Audrey was there in front of them, connected to her audio-visual VR set. She was in a call with Brian, who was still staying back at the 7th research center.

"Hahahhah, unbelievable! So she truly was connected to No. 13! I just saw our little bunny turn into the mist monster, hahahaaaaah! Audrey, what about your side?!"

She coolly began her report.

"No. 13 still hasn't shown any responses, and neither have the other subjects. Also, the supervisor of the orphanage that No. 13 used to stay in has arrived as per your invitation. How shall we proceed?"

"Oh, she's there already? She should be quite familiar with No. 13, so I invited her for another point of view. Feel free to talk to her. Let's see, so

No. 13's still unresponsive..."

"Then I will continue my observation."

Audrey cut off the visual feed and returned her eyes to reality. Turning around, she saw a woman around fifty with heavy makeup slurping some coffee, while making herself *very* comfortable. She turned her smirk to Audrey.

"Done with the Deputy Director's call? Yes, that's right, no one in the world knows that girl more than me! The 'demon child' used to be such a brat when she first joined up. Nothing a few beatings couldn't fix though, heheheh." The supervisor woman said, sounding so very proud of her deeds.

"I see..."

"Yes! And if she hasn't shown any responses, then we can take her out of the capsule and give her the full-body electroshock treatment just like I used to! Even the brat was scared of it back then, screaming and crying every time I did it, so it should work great here!"

Even among the research orphanages established all around the world, this woman was still one of the best in terms of getting results. The corporation rated her highly. And in similarly high-achieving orphanages, such cruelties were a daily occurrence.

"...We will need to request the Deputy Director's permission." Audrey replied.

Policy required the children who were forcefully logged-out due to mental collapses to be kept alive in the collection facility for exactly thirty days. Their plugs would be pulled in order.

The final processing would only begin once life support stopped for all the secret alpha testers. As of now, around seventy percent had reached the end of their lease on life. Their deaths were already confirmed. The very final tester, No. 13, had four days left.

Even if this observation truly revealed a link between No. 13 and the rabbit beastman girl, a live dissection was all that awaited her.

With how her life had been, it would have been much more merciful to just let her die in peace, Audrey thought.

Suddenly, Brian's shout rang out from the VR device.

"What the hell are those monsters?!"

As mist, I was practically running up the mountain. Once I reached a fifth of the way, the cricket spiders finally realized the monster of mist was me. They opened fire.

I had a lot more surface area as mist, so dodging was difficult. Still, with the distance I gained, just a bit of token avoidance was enough to get me out of the way of most of the bullets. Only a few hit.

But the moment the projectiles smashed into the rock face, a vast number of magical signals appeared on my radar. Here and there, beasts made out of stone and boulders began to come into existence. They attacked both me and the cricket-spiders.

What in the world were they?!

[Rock Monster x Lots]

[Magic Points: 500~700]

[Total Combat Power: 530~780]

I didn't see their hit points, so were they spiritual lifeforms? If they weren't demons... then elementals?

Their magic power were about the same as me when I just became a lesser demon. Their numbers were worrying, however. Hundreds? No, perhaps even thousands.

The cricket-spiders had more combat power, yet it meant nothing in front of overwhelming quantity. They immediately gathered up and focused fire on the newcomers. It still could not stop the rock avalanche from swallowing them whole in a blink of an eye.

I didn't have the leeway to worry about them here. If they really were elementals, then perhaps their purpose was to eliminate anyone trying to reach the World Tree without using the sanctioned path.

About a thousand of them began to move toward me. I wasn't sure if it was because I was trying to cross the mountains, or because I was a demon, but they seemed extraordinarily hostile.

I couldn't afford to oppose them head-on. With all my strength, I blasted freezing air at the elementals above me. The frozen boulders became obstacles for the ascending elementals chasing me, and I continued my way to the top.

Time after time, stony barrages assaulted me, and I would avoid them by condensing myself. My path twisted and turned.

Sometimes I ignored the newly-formed elementals, and sometimes I would kill them. After what must have been a whole day, I finally crossed the mountaintop, battered and bruised.

[Shedy] [Race: Mistral Neige] [Greater Demon (High-Rank)]

[Magic Points: 1370/5220] 600↑

[Total Combat Power: 1890/5740] 660↑

Having over 5000 magic still wasn't enough for an evolution or rank-up.

Was there even anything above **[Greater Demon]** in the first place...? Well, stronger was stronger, especially since the elementals were still on my tail.

The World Tree was so close the trunk was clearly visible, but *only* the trunk. Its higher branches lay hidden behind fog.

Surrounded by an inland sea was the Central Island, which I thought was already quite large by itself. But with how much space the World Tree's trunk was taking up, I could barely see any visible earth.

Three days of borrowed time left. More rock elementals were forming around me.

Any more damage and I would seriously risk death here. I flew off from the downward-sloping cliff, taking a few hits from the elementals below me while dodging the projectiles from behind. Finally, I managed to escape to the inland sea.

The rock elementals stopped chasing me at the shoreline. They weren't even shooting, despite the straight flight path I was taking

above the sea.

Were they not considering the waters to be their jurisdiction since they were earth-type? Then whose...

“GGRAAARGHH!!”

The waters erupted. From under the sea appeared aquatic serpents, with fins and everything. They looked like wingless dragons.

[Water Dragon?]

[Magic Points: 465/480] [Hit Points: 1280/1280]

[Total Combat Power: 4950]

Hold up, what the hell was with that power?! And there wasn't just one of them; hundreds of water dragons were patrolling around the Central Island, as if guarding the World Tree.

Damn it, considering how much combat power I had currently, I could die in just one hit if I wasn't careful. Hesitation almost made me freeze up for a moment, but I pushed myself forward.

A few of them noticed me. They opened their mouths, shooting out torrents of water.

[Shedy] [Race: Mistral Neige] [Greater Demon (High-Rank)]

[Magic Points: 940/5220]

[Total Combat Power: 1460/5740]

No no no, too much damage! And that was just a single hit!

I attempted to freeze the water to interrupt any further attacks, but with how low my power had become, I could only create a thin layer of surface ice.

I dodged, avoiding any direct hits, twisting and turning through the water beams. At least I had an advantage in my flight speed. The swimming water dragons were slightly slower than me.

I weaved back and forth to shake off the dragons, at times approaching, at times going away from the island. After a long while,

I finally managed to land on the shore.

[Shedy] **[Race:** Mistral Neige] **[Greater Demon** (High-Rank)]

[Magic Points: 330/5220]

[Total Combat Power: 850/5740]

I could literally die from just a scratch. Thankfully, the water dragons no longer pursue me. Again, was land not their jurisdiction? I thought they would still continue attacking since they weren't elementals. How bewildering. But once I attempted to go inland, I understood why.

An invisible wall was blocking my path.

Was this... a barrier? That can't be right! Were monsters not allowed to approach? I came all the way here, what the hell do I do?!

In my stupor, I barely noticed something rolling out from my **[Packer]** inventory.

boing

...Huh? Blobsy? She bounced ahead, *going through the barrier as if nothing was there*, then stopped. Then she stopped and began hopping in place, as if to say ' *hurry up!*'

Why could she pass...? She's a monster too, right?

[Blobsy] **[Race:** Jelly Slime] **[Kin of Shedy, the Demon]**

[Magic Points: 10/10] **[Hit Points:** 10/10]

[Total Combat Power: 10]

[Special Skill: Laundry - Cleaning]

Oh, 'Cleaning', that was new... wait, no, not that. She hadn't had any important change, that was the point.

Why could Blobsy go in? Such a harmless... ah!

An idea came to mind. I transformed into my **[Human Form]** and gingerly stepped forward.

Nothing stopped me.

So only harmless beasts and *real* humans could cross the barrier, then. If my skill was still at **[Humanoid Form]**, I might have been stuck here forever. What a relief...

‘Thank you, Blobsy! I’ll treat you to tons of food later!’

boing!

Two days of borrowed time left.

I was still some distance away, yet the Tree was already dominating my view. I ran toward it, Blobsy on my shoulder.

Aside from the moss covering the area and the Tree itself, I detected no other signs of life. After a while, I reached one of the Tree’s roots, so enormous its thickness alone took up the space of a baseball field.

I was here. After so long, I was finally here. My salvation must be waiting for me. I had already gambled all my hope on this, after all.

I quietly, gently touched the Tree’s roots.

...nothing’s happening? Perhaps I needed to do something? Or perhaps the roots wouldn’t work, and I’d need to go further up? But back then-

“_____world_____waiting_____you_____save_____human
_____life_____souls_____children_____”

A massive influx of information poured into my mind. I nearly blanked out.

This was... the will of the World Tree? It wasn’t a matter of language or intelligence; its thought processes were simply too alien for human understanding.

If I hadn’t had the experience of processing similarly insane amount of information ever since I began the ‘game’, the Tree really would have fried my brain there and then.

I processed the vast *voice* of the World Tree. Slowly but surely, we communicated.

I wasn't sure how long it took, but it must have been quite a while. As I comprehended its words, the truth of this world was revealed to me.

“...yeah. It's a **[Contract]**, then. Between you and me. Between the World Tree and a demon...”

“...slight fluctuation in No. 13's brain activity!” A staff member reported.

Audrey raised her head and let slip a whisper. “Could it be...?”

“See! This was all thanks to me! I knew unfreezing and shocking her would do the trick!” The orphanage supervisor proudly said.

Only No. 13 was the only one left. All the other secret alpha testers had already had their plugs pulled.

The white girl was lying there unconscious, outside of her suspended-animation capsule. Dozens of electrode rods were stabbing into her flesh. A horrific sight like no other.

“No. 13's vitals are... huh?”

“Something's not right...”

“What's going on...?”

The slight tick in No. 13's brain activity suddenly went off the charts in a blink of an eye.

Audrey and the supervisor woman looked to the white girl. As everyone in the room turned their attentions upon her, No.

13's body rapidly began losing color.

And collapsed into a pile of salt.

The unthinkable sight shocked the staff members into stillness. Meanwhile, the other children's corpses that were waiting for disposal followed suit, turning into piles of salt one after another. The fully-lit

room darkened ever so slightly, as though simply a trick of the light.
Within the skin-crawling chilly room, a faint voice reached their ears.
The voice of a girl.

Chapter 38 REINCARNATION

I was an unwanted child.

My earliest memory was of a fight between my so-called “parents”.

They looked at me with scornful eyes. They vented any and all irritation upon me. They were always yelling. The man called me an eyesore every time he saw me, told me to shut up every time I cried.

How many times he'd kicked me, I didn't recall. Nor could I remember the number of beatings the woman had given me, even as she screamed “You should never have been born!”

Bruises littered my skin. Every morning, I got a single loaf of hard bread to last the whole day.

Once every few days, I would have a chance to wash myself with the leftover bath water. They threw me out to the veranda at night, and I would curl up and sleep in any empty spot I could find among the mountains of trash outside the house.

Before I noticed, the man was no longer around the house. The woman, mind sick and heart twisted, called me a “demon”

as her final words to me. The last I saw of her was her misshapen grin as her hands tightened around my throat.

When I came to, I was in a white hospital room. I was fed decent, warm food for the first time.

I vomited it all.

I didn't speak, laugh, or even cry much. No one would love such a kid. The adults of the orphanage always hit me first before talking. They would take my food away, lock me inside a storeroom until morning, and they called it “discipline”.

What did I ever do?

Upon turning eight years old in the orphanage, I finally gave up on being a child.

“Audrey, what’s going on over there? No. 13 had a response, right? Come on, explain quick!”

The audio-visual VR device could not share any data that was yet to be digitized. Brian, in the 7th research center, could not see what was going on in the collection facility. Audrey and the staff members heard his voice.

But none could speak. The unnatural sight they saw and the chilly *presence* they felt had rooted them to the spot.

No. 13 was lying there, outside of the suspended animation capsule and connected to a myriad of machines. Her body turned white, as if the color was being sucked out of her, and finally crumbled into a pile of salt.

As if in response, the other fifty-six secret alpha tester bodies inside their capsules followed suit and collapsed into salt.

The voice of a girl faintly rang deep inside the ears of everyone there.

“...I’m back...”

A white, shining ball of light gently rose up from No. 13’s pile of salt. The salt flew up and weaved around the ball, forming a vague human shape.

Sounds of fracturing glass rang out throughout the room. From the other fifty-six capsules, the salt slipped through the newly-formed cracks and danced around the human silhouette. They gathered, putting details to the shape.

Smooth white skin, like porcelain.

Curly snow-white hair hanging to the shoulders, and poking out from the locks were two long, similarly white ears.

Her eyes slowly opened, revealing two pools of blood-red pupils.

She floated in the air, graceful limbs bare to all. Then smears of bloody liquid began to form, staining the pure whiteness.

The liquid transformed into a scarlet dress with a black collar and a puffy, layered miniskirt. Black stockings with a hint of red, scarlet high-heels, and red gloves wrapping around sharp claws completed the ensemble.

Such an eerie bunny girl.

As the girl leisurely spread her arms, fifty-six balls of light gathered toward her. She tenderly hugged them to her chest.

“Can you hear me? What the hell is going on?!”

Brian’s voice unknowingly cut through the fantastic spectacle, bringing the room’s occupants back to their own minds.

Hearing the voice, the white girl finally turned her eyes to the *humans*. Her red eyes narrowed into a cool glare.

An electrode rod clattered on the floor.

“...ah?”

Their thoughts could not catch up to reality for an instant. Between one blink of the eye to the next, the white girl’s kick had already taken off the orphanage supervisor’s left arm. The limb was pulverized into dust.

“...aa...aaaaAAAHHH!?”

The stump froze. Despite the lack of any pain or bleeding, the woman still screamed from the terror of seeing her own arm blowing off. As she held the wound with her right hands, the frost spread to her fingers. They shattered, prompting another howl.

“AAAaaAAAArRGGHH!!!”

There was no pain. As the terrified woman writhed on the floor, screaming all the while, the white girl picked up the electrode rod on the floor. She calmly approached, holding down the woman, and

slowly pushed the rod deep into her ear.

“Aakh...gah...”

The supervisor woman twitched, once, twice, then finally lay still. The staff members could only watch in silent horror.

“...aaaaaaAAAAAAHHHH!!!”

A woman was the first among the spectators to react. Her terror, no longer under control, made itself apparent with a throat-splitting scream.

With her voice, the other staff members finally came back to themselves. They rang the alarm.

“Gah...”

A few of them attempted to escape through the exit, yet in another blink of an eye, the girl was there. Her gloved claws tore their heads clean off.

The other staff members were running about in their terrified panic. A blast of mist from the girl turned them into frozen statues in an instant. The sculptures fell down and shattered.

The room temperature dropped sharply, turning the survivors’ breaths into white fog. Their clothes were soaked with cold sweat.

“Freeze!”

The guards showed up, shouting a token warning. The moment they noticed the massacre, they immediately opened fire on the white girl.

The promptness with which they assessed the situation and made the decision to shoot a girl who looked barely a teenager hinted at their experience. Most likely, they were ex-mercenaries hired through the contacts the corporation had in the defense industry.

Three guards stood in front. Running up directly behind them were another five. The bullets grazed the girl. She narrowed her eyes, then pointed her palm at them and made a motion to *crush* something in her hand. The eight guards suddenly collapsed, blood spurting out from everywhere on their bodies.

What did she do...?

Their wounds shared nothing common, both in location and in severity. Over half of them still drew breath. A man among them, both legs broken, still attempted to aim his gun even as he whimpered from the pain. But his efforts were futile; the meandering mist turned him and the rest of the surviving guards into ice sculptures.

“I give permission to deploy the magic weapons!”

Brian finally realized something was wrong and connected to a monitoring camera inside the collection facility. He gave his order.

The monster avatars were still in the experimental phase. However, development of guns with carved runes to allow them the ability to use mana was already near completion. The so-called “magitech weapon of the modern world” was almost ready for use in real combat.

To create mana-sensitive material, they would need to store an amount of silver in close contact with mana for nearly two years. Thus, the resources available to manufacture the weapons were still limited, and the guns themselves could not fire in full-auto due to the large amount of mana required for each activation. On the other hand, the runed guns had the range and power of a typical rifle despite shooting 9mm-sized bullets. Furthermore, the projectiles weren’t affected by the atmosphere or gravity. The very first firearm in the world with a straight bullet path.

Several minutes later, another group of guards arrived. They were holding strange-looking assault rifles.

The guns themselves were slender. Attached to the underside were small containers the size of a pen case: mana batteries.

If they could deploy the mana-operated avatars here, they would already have done so. Unfortunately, operating time was

still too limited, perhaps due to modern Earth’s atmosphere, or perhaps because Earth itself had no mana. The other choice of avatars was the old model that used no mana, and this type could only exhibit 70% the physical capability of a normal adult. In the end, the corporation was forced to use real humans for this fight.

Though the power of magic-using weapons might vary, it didn't change the fact that they were effective against spiritual life forms.

Currently, the facility possessed twenty such 'magic guns', including the reserve. Twelve guards and six staff members with shooting experience were aiming eighteen of the guns at the girl.

"Fire!!!"

Chairs and tables were torn into shreds by the salvo. The moment everyone thought the girl would share their fate...

...she turned into mist. The bullets passed through her without leaving a single trace.

In their shock, the guards even forgot the existence of the guns in their hands for a moment. A white mist blew at them, and from within, the girl leaped out. Once the mist cleared, all that remained were eighteen frozen statues.

"...what the hell is that?!!"

Brian's voice leaked out from the VR device. The white girl looked at the camera that was connected to his vision, her rabbit ears swaying as if to say, "*You already forgot?*" She pointed her palm to the camera and *squeezed*.

"...aaAAAAaaaAAGAAaaaAA! My leg! My leeeeeeeg!"

Brian, who was still supposed to be staying back at the 7th research center, screamed.

He had forgotten. About the fact that in his childhood, he had nearly lost a leg in a traffic accident. *Fortunately*, the driver had stopped in time, and his wound hadn't been as severe as it could be.

But *back in the present*, *unfortunately*, the driver turned out to not have stopped in time at all. One of Brian's legs detached from his body.

A disconnection cut short his echoing scream.

In the room cold enough that water could freeze, Audrey sat on the floor. Her face had turned blue, her lips purple, and she couldn't even muster the courage to stand up.

"...No. 13..." Audrey whispered, her voice shivering.

There were barely anyone left alive. Hearing her whisper, the girl quietly turned around.

Clack... clack... She approached on heels that looked more like they were made to gouge out flesh rather than to carry a girl's weight. The razor-sharp footsteps stopped in front of Audrey. The girl stared at her face.

"You recognize me?"

"Are you... No. 13? Why do you look like that? What did you do to the Deputy Director...?"

Hearing Audrey replied with only more questions, No. 13... the white girl named Shedy looked exasperated. She quietly pulled her head back.

"Nothing special, really. Besides... well, you'll do."

"Ah!"

Shedy picked Audrey up with one hand around the woman's neck.

"I have to go back soon. I'm still not strong enough to stay here for long. But remember this..."

Audrey gulped. Their faces were barely ten centimeters apart. She thought she saw dark flames faintly smoldering deep inside the girl's eyes.

"I'll come back, and I'll be a lot stronger then. The *demon* will come back to kill you all."

Shedy dropped the woman on the ground. The girl casually turned away and disappeared, melting into the thick mist.

That day, the corporation learned of the existence of the demon that would be their enemy.

Author's Note: The description of her outfit might not be easy to understand, so I made this rough sketch.

If you're not very good at imagining how she looked and if you're interested, feel free to take a look.



Chapter 39 A CONTRACT AND AN OATH

My foggy vision slowly cleared up. I was standing at the World Tree, a

giant so enormous it took up all of my field of view.

Good, I came back without any problems. Honestly, staying any longer on Earth would have been really dangerous for me.

bounce!

“I’m back, Blobsy.”

She rubbed herself on my feet. She’d been waiting for me on this side.

I scooped her up and put her on my shoulder. Exhausted from overuse of magic, I dragged myself toward the Tree’s roots and spread my arms.

“Here they are.”

The souls of the fifty-six secret alpha testers, children who had met their demise on Earth, flew off from my chest. One after another, they were absorbed into the Tree, as if following an invisible guiding hand.

Go ahead and rest, okay? You’ve earned it.

Through the Saplings, the souls of the other forty-three secret alpha testers who had lost their life in this world were already resting within the World Tree.

Except for me, all the ninety-nine children were together now.

No. 01, No. 08, No. 17... there was no way you could hear me now. Still, I wanted to say thanks. For saving my life.

The **[Contract]** I made with the World Tree had allowed me to reincarnate into a demon. I had been granted a new life on this world.

It was all thanks to the powers I inherited from my comrades. If I lacked even one, I wouldn’t have been standing here.

The contract had also granted me more power and maturity for my body. I now had the height and appearance of a fourteen-year old.

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Lesser Archdemon Lv. 1]

□The rabbit demon of Laplace. Trickster and guide of man’s fate.

[**Magic Points:** 730/12000] 6780↑

[**Total Combat Power:** 1930/13200] 7460↑

[**Unique Skill:** <Causality Alteration> <Cyber-Manipulation>
<Absorption> <Materialization>]

[**Racial Skill:** <Fear> <Mist Form>]

[**Simple Identification**] [**Human Form** (Wonderful)] [**Subspace Inventory**]

I gave up.

Sure, I might have already accepted the fact that I would be spending my whole life with rabbit ears and tail, but that [**Race**] was still going *way* too far, wasn't it?!

And I might have had thoughts about just embracing the inevitable and getting an actual bunny suit, but that was no permission for [**Materialization**] to do such a *stupidly* good job. Now I had a weird outfit. I never even wanted it.

The design, except for the skirt, was probably influenced by the images I'd seen of *those* sorts of bunny girls.

...at least my chest and hips were covered up. Thank goodness I still had enough subconscious shame to stop the outfit from looking too outrageous.

My skirt was made out of layered sheets of fabric, which made it quite puffy. However, once I took out my cloak from [**Packer**] and wore it, the skirt magically flattened. How convenient.

Right, so [**Packer**] evolved too.

It turned into [**Subspace Inventory**] now, which allowed me to use it in human form, too. Turned out the items I'd been storing until now wasn't actually staying inside my body like I used to think. They were staying in distorted space.

I was now a [**Lesser Archdemon**]. Apparently there was a big-shot called an Archdemon, and my class was based on it.

The World Tree must have given me the information. These weren't knowledge I would have known otherwise.

However, my class didn't have Low or High-Rank like before, but a level display instead. Did it mean there were multiple more steps before I could become an actual Archdemon?

Most probably, I wouldn't be *changing* like in the Rank-Ups I'd done until now. I would only be gaining more power. I had no basis for my belief, but somehow I knew it to be true.

I had over ten thousand magic power now. Still, it wasn't enough *power* for me to complete my **[Contract]** by my lonesome.

This was where my 'Unique Skills' came into play.

This was just a guess, but... perhaps my race had changed due to the evolution of my own unique skill, **[Reroll]**.

It had become **[Causality Alteration]**.

I was born with the power to unconsciously cause 'bad luck' to happen to other people. They would trip on flat ground.

Their scratches would become serious wounds.

My newly-evolved **[Causality Alteration]** interfered with my target's *karma* in order to change an event to 'the most unlucky outcome'.

But even evolved, my skill was still governed by a chance of success. If the wound in their past was easy to avoid, or if my target was powerful, my chance of success and amount of magic consumed would vary greatly.

Those guards were formerly mercenaries. They were, quite literally, all *lucky* survivors, so the chance of granting misfortune to their past wounds were over 75% for all of them.

Although the magic consumption really surprised me. To worsen a single wound of a mundane human with no magic and only around 150 combat power, an opponent which might as well be an ant to me, actually took a whole 100 of my magic.

My own stockpile of magic was dropping like a rock just by maintaining myself on magicless Earth. Combined with my attempts to hurt the Deputy Director from a distance, which only had a 12% success chance and which I only succeeded after multiple failures, my remaining magic had dropped to under a thousand.

The minimum combat power I could have was ten percent of my maximum magic power, so I was practically invincible when facing mundane humans. Still, seeing my magic going so low got me a bit worried.

...I mean, I couldn't help myself. I *really* wanted to get at least a hit in on those guys.

Unlike before, the mist was no longer the real me. My base form had switched over to being the 'bunny girl', while I gained **[Mist Form]** as a racial skill.

It didn't really change my combat style. Still, if my body was destroyed, I wouldn't be able to reform myself into mist again like I used to. I'd need to be more careful.

Especially when I would have to take on the whole world in order to fulfill my contract with the World Tree.

Everyone, from the people of this world to the corporation, all believed in the same thing. That the World Tree and its Saplings sustained the world with infinite mana.

But that was wrong.

Mana on this world was created from the *souls* of living beings.

As creatures died, their souls were then gathered by the Saplings and then sent to the World Tree.

The World Tree was the *maintenance system* created by the world of Yggdrasia. Among the gathered souls, souls that had gathered a large amount of experience would be allowed to retain some of it and reincarnate as a higher form of life. Souls not as accomplished would have their experience absorbed by the World Tree, and then reborn as a normal living being.

And finally, souls with only a miniscule amount of experience were completely recycled into pure mana, becoming materials to create new souls.

The mana filling this world all came from converted experience of living beings.

The mana kept inside the World Tree and the Saplings were for creating new *life*.

But the human race of this world was squandering it for their own luxury. The Tree wasn't able to keep up with the conversion. It even had to begin dipping into the mana storage set aside for creating life.

With less and less new life being born, this world was slowly heading toward destruction.

And now, even another world came to steal the mana. Mana used on Earth would not return. Yggdrasia was, quite literally, having its lifeblood drained.

The contract I made with the World Tree was one of Destruction and Rebirth.

The human race had built countries around the Saplings, stealing mana like blood-sucking parasites.

My goal was to destroy the ninety-nine Saplings all around the world. And then, with new, strong souls, the World Tree Saplings would be reborn.

Souls possessing power and purity... I would help my comrades, the ninety-nine secret alpha testers, gain their second lives as the World Tree's new Saplings.

Their souls had known as much. They still decided to go with me.

Once humans lost the Saplings, their civilization would crumble. While individual human thoughts might vary, the countries would surely come to prevent me from completing my quest.

War was inevitable. War between me... and all ninety-nine human countries.

And as Earth was planning to lean on this world to solve their energy problems, they would certainly interfere.

I would destroy this world's civilization, and I would shut down the meddlings of Earth. I would make enemies out of two planets.

I looked up at the World Tree, at the new home of my comrades. Here,

I swore an oath to myself.

I shall become the demon of death. The shatterer of worlds.



Chapter 40 THE WORLD STARTS TURNING

Three months had passed since the beginning of the beta test of the VRMMORPG *World of Yggdrasia*. Despite original plans calling for a six-months test, the official game release had just recently been announced.

The official reason for the early release, as the public knew it, was because of “great beta player response” and “to scratch the itch of everyone who weren’t chosen as beta testers”. Meanwhile, those more aware of the situation suspected interference from the game’s financial backer – the government.

To some extent, both were true: it was true that there was great customer demand for the full release, and it was also true that the government was hurrying the development. Yet there was an even deeper reason, a secret only known to the upper echelons of the project.

Within the terminal care medical facility of the 7th research center of a certain pharmaceutical and defense conglomerate, an *accident* resulting in the death of nearly all staff members had happened.

Casualties numbered over seven hundred. While some sort of bladed weapon had claimed the lives of some, including all the security officers, the vast majority of victims had died from hypothermia. Their bodies were found inside an environmental chamber, a room equipped with perfect temperature and humidity control capability.

The cold wave must have been extremely rapid, as there were hardly any lucky survivors who managed to escape through the windows. The less fortunate had turned into ice sculptures littering the path to the outside. Clinging to the glass in despair were frozen statues of those who hadn’t been quick enough to open their own windows before the frost welded them shut.

Hypothermic deaths in a closed room. Such a mysterious, almost supernatural incident was certainly worthy of attention, yet the upper echelons remained far more interested in the culprit of the matter.

A white girl in a red dress with rabbit ears.

She was uncannily similar to the rabbit beastman girl who had been witnessed single-handedly destroying multiple experimental weaponized monster avatars within *World of Yggdrasia*.

According to the testimonies of the survivors and what the cameras had captured before the cold shattered their lens, the girl had looked nearly identical to No. 13, a subject of the first monster avatar test who had been transported to the collection facility following her mental collapse and coma. However, the culprit of the incident had looked older than No.

13, and so the link remained unproven.

The government and the corporation's leaders had certainly noticed the high combat power she displayed even when limited in a humanoid form, but they were far more interested in the possible existence of the ability to cross between worlds that she might have possessed. They began thinking about using the players as local eyes to help them capture The Girl.

The number of potential players, people who were expected to be buying the official release, was at least three millions.

By setting her up to be the final villain of the game, the Dark Lady, the players' enthusiasm could easily be directed toward the rabbit hunt.

To that end, player battles weren't the only videos shown at the announcement for the official release of *World of Yggdrasia*. The game developers had also included a few combat scenes with monster avatars. Even footage of The Girl in a red dress massacring the facility staff members — an incident that had been quietly processed behind closed doors —

were edited and presented as if it was simply a high-quality CG video. The scenes of carnage poured more fuel onto the players' interest in her.

There were several changes from the beta version to the official version.

First was the halved-magic death penalty. In order to let the players have more fun with the game and *have less reservations about dying*, the penalty was reduced to thirty percent.

Second, implementation of the feature to change one's appearance and equipment that wouldn't drop upon death. Both could be bought in the in-game store.

Third, addressing the issue of transportation that a subgroup of players had reported, mainly by adding more train lines and dispensing discount tickets. The developers had also reiterated that as the in-game countries were generally around the same size as real-world countries, players were recommended to have fun within the area they spawned in first before looking beyond.

Fourth, an addition to Terms and Conditions. When a lawbreaking player was arrested in a city, they would now immediately receive an official notice of character deletion. If their activities were deemed overly offensive and had affected other players as well, then even their account might be deleted.

And finally, the implementation of a feature long-awaited by many players: monster avatars.

Just as always, the VR chat boards of *World of Yggdrasia* were aflame with talks of the official release.

"The standard game will be priced at \$69. The limited First Edition release, which included a 1/6 Fluffy Bunny figurine, will retail for \$198."

"Fucking expensive! Still buying though."

"Oh... so whoever making those fan figurines must have gotten a C&D, then..."

"Actually, I heard they got an exclusive contract instead, and that they'll be working on the rumored 'grown-up version' too."

“I suppose now that the Fluffy Bunny has become the Dark Lady, the devs are putting a stop to sales of fan merchandise, then...”

“So... I guess figure A’s gonna be the twelve-year old casual-wear version? Then B must be the fourteen-year old Dark Lady dress version?”

“Never would have thought the game’s final boss was hiding inside a player-held event. What the hell were the devs smoking? Gimme some.”

“A bunny suit? But isn’t it a dress?”

“It looks kinda like a bunny suit if you ignore the skirt.”

“Shit, I can’t decide which to buy. The first kid version’s so cute, while the teenage one’s even a little bit sexy too.”

“Why not both? Better be quick though, otherwise the resellers are going to buy it all up.”

“So monster avatars are finally here... what’s it like? Would I need a separate account?”

“You’ll need to buy the new \$19.80 DLC, which is also a lot more difficult. Tons of restrictions, too. You can create a monster character in parallel to your main human one. Apparently if you get discovered by humans, it’s pretty much a 100% chance they’ll be hostile.”

“Holy shit, that’s rough. Can you fight human players?”

“Considering what sort of game this is, I’m pretty sure you can even fight human NPCs if you wanted to. There’s probably gonna be a hunting force out for your head sooner or later, though.”

“Wait a minute... does it mean I can join the Fluffy Bunny’s side?”

“The devs might be expecting that too. You’ll have to actually find out where she is first, though.”

“Alright, I’m pumped! I’m gonna be the Bunny’s pet!”

“Little bunny... where are yoooooooouuu...”

Among the staff of the 7th research center, Brian had been famous for absolutely never staying at work beyond his hours, no matter how busy his subordinates were. Yet now, he was spending every moment of free time inside VR. Bloodshot eyes stared from the viewpoint of a watcher drone.

Around one month earlier, he suddenly lost his right leg despite being completely healthy just moments before. It had since been replaced with a prosthetic leg incorporating Avatar technology.

With the new leg, his daily life saw no inconvenience. However, phantom pain still plagued him even until now, and his hatred toward The Girl who had robbed him of his leg had rendered his mind dangerously unstable.

The general-use monster avatars were still far from being suitable for practical usage. All the same, it was Brian’s suggestion to release them for the public.

He chased after The Girl like a man infatuated. He was the one to have given the order to edit and release footage of her as bait for the normal players.

He had convinced the higher-ups to unveil the monster avatars by saying it was to “work out the kinks in usage time for the militarized monster avatars” and to “increase versatility in their action patterns”. The normal monster avatars, even with their growth, could only reach 60% the capability of the militarized models at most. On the other hand, The Girl might let down her guard around harmless monsters. She had been taking care to avoid being seen by humans or the watcher drones. There was a good chance she would allow a friendly-looking monster avatar to get close.

And as long as her location was pinpointed, Brian could use that monster avatar as the anchor to send more militarized avatars. Removing the mana safety regulation to turn them into suicide bombers at point-blank range could also be a good choice, if she seemed negligent enough.

“Come out, come out, wherever you aaaaaare, little bunny...”

In his madness, he would not hesitate to deceive his superiors just for a chance of vengeance. Even Audrey dared not go near him.

Pre-orders reached 2,300,000. Including release day, total sales reached 3,430,000 copies. Around sixty percent of the buyers, after their character creation and subsequent game login, were immediately met with a sudden event announcement.

“Southern continent, Principality of Rantetrois. The Sapling has been destroyed by the Dark Lady. Subsequently, the Temple at the Principality of Rantetrois has lost its function. Players of the affected country are recommended to move to the closest country as soon as possible.”

Author’s Note: Suzumi-sama has blessed me with a wonderful drawing.



Super cute. It's ten-years old Shedy at around the beginning of Arc 2.

According to Suzumi-sama, Shedy was growing up so fast they couldn't finish the drawing in time **sweatdrops**.

Thank you very much.

Light exposition. Spawning point.

The militarized monster avatars need an anchor point to spawn from. In most cases, the anchors are fixed on the watcher drones that were deployed from a Temple.

On magicless Earth, however, avatars need specialized equipment to be created.

Chapter 41 DETERMINED EVIL

Back to the recent past.

Far below the Central Continent was the Southern Continent. Two large countries and five small countries lay claim to the continent, and neighboring them were two island countries.

The island countries only had populations of about 50,000 people. Barely enough for a single decently-sized town. All the same, apparently in this world, any population group congregating around a World Tree Sapling could be legally considered a 'country', and so that was what they were.

I had had some time thinking about where to attack first. According to the guidebook, the Central Continent was the original birthplace of the human race. Civilization there were quite advanced, plus those countries had a lot of people too.

Which meant their military were possibly the most difficult opponents I could face.

The guidebook also included the order in which the Saplings were discovered. Countries until 50 had the ancient history to back them up. They really seemed like proper nations.

The Touze Empire, where Tiz was, was number 12. It was even in the Central Continent to boot. Military, population, history, it had it all. This one was going to be a pain in my neck.

And so I decided on the Southern Continent. Reason number one, it *wasn't* the Central Continent. Two, the countries there were only about halfway through the numbering.

Getting there was going to be so troublesome. Continent-crossing without using an airship would waste tons of my time.

If I was a normal human, I'd have to take an airship or a ship ride from Ayune to Cinqres, then transit through Neuft and Quarondeux to enter the Southern Continent. But I didn't have the time for a world tour.

The world wouldn't die off in just a decade or two, obviously. But if I took too long to move between the Saplings, it would take dozens of decades to destroy them all. I was worried that Earth would have begun large-scale mana harvesting by then.

Thankfully, my 'partner in crime', the World Tree, had solved half of the problem for me.

The World Tree and its Saplings were networked together, transporting mana and souls between them. So I thought, *maybe I could hitch a ride on the network, considering I was a spiritual lifeform?* It was a simple idea, but it worked... partially, at least.

If I turned into mist, I could travel through the network. But once I reached the barrier of the human country surrounding the Sapling, I'd bounce off it, perhaps due to me being a Demon. And I couldn't turn back to human during the ride anyway...

"...where was I?"

After hitting the barrier, my landing spot was a forest somewhere between the mountains.

bounce

Oh, Blobsy was looking as lively as ever. My **[Subspace Inventory]** skill, the evolution of **[Packer]**, couldn't store living beings. Or to be more precise, I *could* force them in if I wanted to, but their biological activities would cease within storage and they'd die. Blobsy was only fine by virtue of being my Kin.

Still, she seemed bored after her time in storage. She bounced to her usual spot on my shoulder.

First off, I'd need to know where I was. I took out and wore my cloak from **[Inventory]**, then ran up the mountain. Within a few minutes, I crossed the distance a normal human would need half a day to make.

On the way, there were a few times I detected hostilities from what I assumed to be wild monsters. I just focused and threw **[Fear]** at them and none would dare get any closer. All hail high combat power.

As I reached the mountaintop, I searched for a tall tree. I climbed to

its top, standing on tiptoes.

To my left was the sea. Far off to my right, I could see a town.

With how close it was to the ocean, maybe it was one of the small countries on this continent? I was closer to my target than I thought. I jumped off the tree, transforming into mist and flew.

I just needed to flash my adventurer card to the guards and they let me in without any problems. Border control was as lazy as always. Well, I supposed a traveler entering the country on foot wasn't exactly a common occurrence around here.

"Hey, you over there!"

"..."

For some reason, one of the gate guards called at me. The young man nearing his twenties said something to the other guard and ran toward me.

"Where did you come from?"

"Outside."

"No, that's... well, yes, but that's not what I'm talking about."

He leaned closer and spoke in a whisper.

"Looking at your shoes, you're a noble girl from somewhere, right? Did your carriage break down and you had to walk here?"

"...ah."

Whoops. I forgot about my scarlet stiletto heels (which were actually as deadly as their namesake, I might add). They were still peeking out from under my cloak. You'd never see normal adventurers or travelers wearing these.

Was the guard planning on threatening me? As he saw me slightly raising my guard, he hastily jumped back.

"Wait, no, I'm not going to do anything to you! I mean, you were going to a noble's mansion, right? Maybe the guardhouse? It's dangerous if you were alone on the way."

Hmm... apparently he was just worried about me. Of course that's all it was. I never thought all humans were trash in the first place, but maybe I did have a bit of a bias.

"...I want to go to the governor's mansion."

"The Governor?! No, I mean, it's fine, but it's quite far, you know?"

"Really?"

"I can guide you there, if you don't mind? I can show you the town on the way too."

"..."

He might have been friendly, but it looked like he had ulterior motives, too. Well, it was convenient for me anyway, so I nodded. He waved to the other guard. They smirked and gave him a thumbs-up.

He told me about the city express stagecoach, which we found and got on. His name was Laurent, nineteen years old. The fifth son of a destitute knightly house. The family was still of nobility, more or less, even if in name only.

"Well, we'll drop back to being commoners if we don't contribute anything worthy, though."

"I see..."

Laurent told me a lot of things, all the while sitting unusually close to me.

We were in the Principality of Rantetrois, a small country situated to the north of the Southern Continent. Despite being called a 'country', it was composed of only the capital, where we were, and a large cherry plantation for wine-making.

The population was only around 100,000 people.

I had known it was different from the Central Continent. Still, I never realized how wide the gap was until I noticed there wasn't a single classy-looking establishment in the whole city, like those I saw in Trestan Kingdom's capital.

"This place used to be called 'the front door to the Central Continent' in the old days, but once airships were invented, the only people

coming here were merchants after our wines.”

“...but you have a Sapling, so you’re living just fine, right?”

“Yeah, thanks to it, we don’t even need to worry about wasting magic. I once heard a geezer working on the fields complaining that the vegetables were growing so fast due to the mana, he were having trouble eating them all before it rots.”

“Hmm...”

So they *were* wasting magic.

It looked like the World Tree Sapling was truly at the governor’s mansion, then, considering how heavily guarded the place seemed to be. Most countries were probably the same in placing their Saplings inside the palace.

A few hours later, we reached the district in which the governor lived. We got off the express carriage and started walking there. My steps carried me through the streets... and away from Laurent every time he started up another one of his constant attempts to hold my hand.

Now that I was aware of the *truth*, the town in my eyes no longer looked the same.

Here and there, air conditioners ran with doors opened. Glowing sign boards lit up the street even during midday. Piles of produce overcrowded groceries, grown in excess due to the mana.

And no humans were working the fields. Only the demihuman slaves they had captured.

The mana here was like oil of Earth, I suppose. It could even work as electricity without needing to go through power plants.

If the mana went away, what would happen to this country?

The ensuing chaos wasn’t difficult to imagine. Once again, the impossibility of any attempts at persuasion made itself apparent to me.

I stopped on a clothing store along to way to buy new cloaks and boots for disguising purposes, plus the latest guidebook.

We were standing in front of the governor’s mansion a while later.

It really was a mansion, not a castle. Three stories, looked quite spacious.

“Hey, hey, tell me your name already. I came with you all this way, why not have a bit of a drink with your hard-working guide?”

Laurent must have gotten impatient with how I’ve been shrugging off his approach. He kept trying to touch me, to drag me to the bar.

“Hey, Laurent.”

“Mmm?”

“So, just hypothetically... what if mana is no longer free?”

“Whaa? Why would that happen? We can get as much mana from the Saplings as we wanted, right?”

“And what if this world gets worse in the future because we keep doing it?”

I stared into his eyes. He just snorted.

“Heh, you’re joking, right? No way that would happen. And even if it does, it’ll be way after I die of old age anyway.”

“I see...”

Was this the general opinion of the human race here? So much like Earth of old, back when people there were still aloof to the environment.

Yet in the end, all the countries still continued to leech mana. Once they knew of the comfort it brought, no one had the courage to stop.

No one wanted to be the first to speak out and be branded a *villain*.

To change things, Evil was necessary. An overwhelming Evil to become the target for humankind’s displeasure and resentment.

“Well then, thanks, Laurent. I can find my way from here.”

“Hahh? What’re you saying?”

At first, I had thought to just sneak in and destroy the Sapling in secret. But then, the resentment of humanity would just be vented upon the weak.

Just as they'd always done to the demihumans. Just as the adults had done to me when I was younger...

A few dozens meters away, the governor's mansion guards looked at us with dubious gazes. At Laurent walking around in his gate guard uniform, and at me hiding my face under my hood.

For better or for worse, I had quite the reputation now. I intended to use it.

I slowly walked toward the gate. Laurent put a hand on my shoulder.

"Come on, enough al-eeek!" He yelped at the whiff of ice-cold air.

I stretched out a hand and blasted arctic mist at the gate.

"Aaaeeeyaaa! W-What happened?!"

The gate froze in a blink of an eye. The edge of the frigid cloud hit Laurent. He screamed, tumbling on the ground.

Eddies of wind whirled from the temperature difference, blowing off my hood. The moment the onlookers noticed my snow-white ears, their eyes widened.

I took off my cloak, showing off my rabbit ears, tail, and the scarlet bunny girl outfit. I turned my mouth into a goading smirk.

"Hurry up, people. Get out of my way if you don't want to die."

What was a Demon?

I used to think it was just one of those things no one could prove the existence of, much like God. Just one of the type of monsters I had to choose as a tester of weaponized avatars.

But now, I had been reborn in this world as a Demon.

Miraculously, I still kept my former appearance, if only more grown up. Yet in the end, it didn't change the fact that I was no longer

human.

Still, was I a *real* demon?

The sort of demons I knew were the type to worm into the hearts of humans, to corrupt them and take their souls. And with my recent experience, I'd come to hold a vague suspicion: could it be that demons were corrupting humans because they gained more experience from souls of evil people?

[Absorption] was how I drained the lives of my enemies. Something that I was now doing without a second thought.

Perhaps human thoughts and desires had come together in a stroke of random chance, and the World Tree had taken it, given it direction, turning it into what I now was. An Artificial Demon.

I was indistinguishable from a real demon, yet at the same time our natures could not be any more irreconcilable.

I was still *me*, only now playing the role of a demon named Shedy.

Which was why I could become a Demon for another's sake.

The Principality of Rantetrois was a quaint little pastoral country. Their population was meager, and their main – and only

– industry was the cherry plantation on the mountainside used for making wine.

Thanks to the infinite mana coming from the Saplings, no humans ever went hungry. They had no need to steal or pillage from others. It was the reason why Rantetrois could keep their idyllic peace.

The Central Continent might still see conflict of interests from time to time between men and women with unending, unsatisfiable greed for fame, luxury, and more, but here in the Southern Continent, the closest thing to a conflict was the little spat between the two large countries. There was no serious discord. And as Rantetrois itself had

no resources particularly worth disputing over, people in the country were satisfied as long as they had demihuman slaves to bring them a bit of profit. They might envy the other rich countries somewhat, but they were happy with the tranquil, effortless lives they had.

Such peaceful countries still maintained armies and knight orders, not to defend themselves from other humans, but mainly to fend off monsters.

Forests and similar places within the mana-rich regions around the Saplings tended to accumulate mana. From these so-called 'manaswamps', weak monsters would be born without end.

Towns and villages could make use of the abundant mana from the Saplings to erect barriers around themselves, but the streets between them enjoyed no such protection. Soldiers and knights patrolled daily to deal with any monsters near the roads.

One of their other missions, no less important, was to search for and destroy the manaswamps.

These manaswamps, formed from mana leaking from the Saplings, were sources of nourishment for the forest in which they were created. Once they were destroyed, the mana would then re-accumulate back at the Sapling. In other words, the mana usable by humans would increase.

With that said, the job of knights and soldiers was still a simple, easy one. Just stand around, go patrol, call out if they saw a girl walking around. If dangerous monsters appeared, just get the demihuman slaves to deal with them.

Laurent, born as the fifth son of a family full of that sort of knights, only had the job of the town gate guard left for him.

Just the minimum earning was enough to live comfortably, so he wasn't particularly worried. Still, if he lost his noble standing – even if that nobility was nothing but an empty title – he'd quickly find out how much 'minimum wage' could actually vary. Marrying a good woman or buying a good-looking demihuman slave girl would then get difficult.

But then, he saw a strange girl walking from outside the city.

She was wearing an unassuming cloak, the hood hiding her face. But Laurent could still see her fair, pristine-white skin and the high-heels she was wearing, the kind frequently seen in higher society. *Probably a noble girl of some other land on an incognito trip*, he thought.

He did think it strange that she had no attendants. Still, the moment he saw her fair features and her hardened eyes of scarlet peeking out from under the hood, he was taken over by a single thought: *I wanna make her mine*.

Laurent was confident in his looks and his conversational skills, yet it had been half a day and she was still giving him the cold shoulder. When she started talking ridiculous stuff out of nowhere, he got nervous. Just as he was thinking to just forcefully pull her somewhere, she suddenly shot an ice spell toward the front gates of the governor's mansion.

“Aaaeeeyaaa! W-What happened?!” He screamed.

The resulting wave of frigid wind knocked him to the ground. The whole gate, together with the gatekeepers, froze over in an instant. They were crumbling and shattering from the contraction caused by extreme temperature change. As the world turned into a nightmare in front of him, Laurent heard the spellcasting girl spoke.

“Hurry up, people. Get out of my way if you don't want to die.”

Her legs and back came into view. A dress, red as blood, covered the white girl.

But neither Laurent nor the onlookers were taking much notice of her strange attire. They were far more occupied with the long, snow-white ears drooping from her head and the small, adorable bushy tail.

“...a beastman?”

For a single moment, indignation overtook Laurent, even pushing aside any thoughts of her magic. *Just a common animal dared to deceive me? To deceive humans?* At the same time, he also realized that if she was a demihuman, then nothing was stopping him from taking her as his possession by force.

But then, what were those long ears?

They looked just like a *rabbit*'s. A vague memory niggled at his mind... and then he heard the words one of the onlookers let slip.

“The rabbit... Five thousand large gold coins!”

With the voice came the recollection for everyone at the scene. They remembered how a few weeks earlier, they had seen the bounty dispatched by Touze Empire all the way from the Central Continent.

The white rabbit beastman girl who used mist magic. Whoever caught her would be rewarded five thousand large gold coins.

Large golds. A currency unit the common man would never see even for the whole of his life. Enthralled by greed, the onlookers surged toward her with nothing but fists and knives.

“The bunny!” “Rabbit beastman!” “Five thousand large golds!”

Voices chained from one to another like a game of telephone. The news spread out in an instant. More than just men were joining the crowd of people flooding toward the governor's mansion; even their wives were joining in with kitchen knives in hands, while the elderlies were grabbing whatever rocks they could find nearby.

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“Golds! My large golds!”

A plump woman screamed and charged at me. I jumped off her, at the same time sending her flying with my stomp. I weaved through the sea of people.

I knew showing my ears would cause a ruckus. I just didn't think even the women and the senior citizens were joining in.

I hopped on their heads, jumping around the crowd but never leaving. After a while, soldiers from inside the governor's mansion finally showed up.

“What in the world was going on here?!”

Surrounded by the group of soldiers was an important-looking person. The crowd of citizens, nearing a hundred, immediately stopped whatever they were doing at the sound of his voice. A shopkeeper-ish looking person from the crowd hastily ran toward him and started talking. Then, the important-looking middle-aged man smirked and pointed at me.

"I see, so you're the rabbit beastman girl that boy from Touze posted a bounty for! Just stay right there! I won't let him have you, you'll be staying with me for life!"

"..."

I supposed 'that boy' was Tiz, then. Was this guy this country's governor? Never thought he'd be showing up right away.

The crowd of people, daunted by his orders, slowly lowered their weapons.

But then I noticed another few hundreds townspeople on the other side of the crowd running toward us. I smiled at the crowd, my ears lightly swaying.

"My, my. Are you sure you don't want those large gold coins?"

"..." "O-Of course we do!" "Yeah, that's right! Money's more important than that stupid governor!"

A few of them regained their courage, their voices slowly getting louder. The governor, hearing their words, widened his eyes.

"Fools, have you forgotten about your own lord?! I was the one to have fed you, to have given you places to live, and you good-for-nothings don't even have the decency to pay the taxes!"

"The fuck you saying?!" "Shut the fuck up, dumbshit governor!" "Oh, sure, we haven't forgotten *at all* how you kept raising the mana price all the time!" "And all that money just goes to your pockets, right?!"

The governor here really wasn't very popular at all, was he. With the new influx of people, the crowd only got bolder and bolder. They rained down complaints upon the governor.

The governor's face was turning into an unhealthy red. He pulled out and swung his sword.

“Enough! Cut down whoever stands in my way!”

The moment his soldiers charged at the citizens, I threw out a large, thick cloud of mist.

“Wha-?! Where the hell did this mist come from?!”

“I can’t see shit! Where’s the rabbit?!”

“Wasn’t she just here-”

“I-I... aaaAAAAAAGGHHH!!”

After I attacked a few of them, the citizens and soldiers began wildly swinging their weapons in terror. More and more of them were hurting each other.

The cold mist *could* kill all of them at once, but that wasn’t what I was using this time. This particular mist was simply a harmless wide-range smokescreen that would stay for a long time even without my supervision.

I slipped through the chaos and headed toward the mansion. Suddenly, someone blocked my path.

“Found you, damn rabbit!”

The governor came out to face me all by himself. How thoughtless of him... I supposed it was no wonder. No matter how much he touted himself a nation’s king, in the end, he was nothing more than the lord of a relatively big town.

I stopped. His mouth twisted into a nasty smirk, perhaps thinking I was surrendering. He approached.

“Yes... that’s right... I got you no-aaakgh!”

Inside the mist, the governor abruptly fell on his face.

For a moment, I wondered what happened. Then I saw Laurent standing behind the governor, his sword slick with blood.

He looked at me with a eerie smile on his face.

“You’re supposed to be mine... isn’t that right?”

“...”

I had no idea what he was talking about. Well, I supposed it was about time, anyway. I had already destroyed the watcher drones I found, but if I dragged this on any further, the corporation might just throw some more monster avatars my way.

Laurent walked closer to me, his smile unchanging. I gently raised my palm and blasted off a wave of icy wind. It swallowed him, then continued on toward where I thought the mass of people were.

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I left the smokescreen there, outside the mansion. The messy riot was still going on.

Inside the mansion, I only saw servants at most. After freezing just a few who ran up to attack me, there was no longer anyone else standing on my way.

The mansion was quite spacious, about a baseball field's size. Still, there was no need for me to find a guide. I knew right away where the Sapling was.

It was inside the mansion's courtyard. There were no locks. Anyone could have come here if they wanted to.

“...”

It was a tree over a dozen meters tall. But its bark was stripped off, its trunk was stabbed by stakes of metal, and its leaves were all plucked clean. There were workers standing nearby to harvest any newly grown leaves. They turned into ice statues in an instant.

It hurts, right? I know. People used to do this sort of things to me all the time, too.

It's okay. I'm here. You'll be free from the pain soon.

I touched the Sapling's roots, slowly freezing it. The branches, long-since withered, fell to the ground and turned into dust. Then the Sapling itself followed suit, scattering into the wind.

Immediately, I felt something in the air changing.

Lights and air conditioners inside the mansion shut off one after another. Confusion spread out from the building. Well, they would soon find out that the real chaos was only just beginning.

The Sapling network connection was the last to go. Before it did, I hitched a ride to go to the birthplace of the new Sapling. The destination was deep inside a forest, forbidding trees barring the way of any intruders. Hidden among the greenery was a small, thirty-centimeters tall seedling.

This was quite far away from human territories, so I didn't think it's be discovered. Still, just in case, I and Blobsy gathered some mulch to hide the newborn Sapling. As we did, a small, white-colored magic stone appeared from within the Sapling and flew toward me. It disappeared inside me.

Eh...? What was this?

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Lesser Archdemon Lv. 2]

☐The rabbit demon of Laplace. Trickster and guide of man's fate.

[Magic Points: 14200/15600] 3600↑

[Total Combat Power: 15700/17100] 3900↑

[Unique Skill: <Causality Alteration> <Cyber-Manipulation> <Absorption> <Materialization>]

[Racial Skill: <Fear> <Mist Form>]

[Simple Identification] [Human Form (Wonderful)] [Subspace Inventory]

...I just leveled up.

Chapter 43 THE WHITE SHADOW COMES

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Lesser Archdemon Lv. 2]

☐The rabbit demon of Laplace. Trickster and guide of man's fate.

[Magic Points: 14200/15600] 3600↑

[Total Combat Power: 15700/17100] 3900↑

[Unique Skill: <Causality Alteration> <Cyber-Manipulation>
<Absorption> <Materialization>]

[Racial Skill: <Fear> <Mist Form>]

[Simple Identification] [Human Form (Wonderful)] [Subspace Inventory]

I got to level two of Lesser Archdemon.

I only gained about 5 magic from killing a single normal person. Even if a soldier was worth 10, I still didn't kill all that many people this time around. About 3000 of my magic gain was coming from out of nowhere.

"...was it you?" I spoke to the reborn Sapling. I thought I felt a faint wisp of mana reaching me, as though a response.

The souls of the 99 secret alpha testers, those who had died from the corporation's betrayal, were resting in the World Tree. They would then be granted new lives as the reborn Saplings.

Who this Sapling used to be, I didn't know. All the same, they had turned a fragment of their newly-gained lifeforce into a white magic stone to give to me.

Thanks. I'll protect you, I swear it.

I and Blobsy continued building the small mulch hill.

boing

We finished our work. Blobsy jiggled on my shoulder, as though proud of a job well done.

I should confirm the location, at least. I climbed on top of a nearby mountain. There, I saw the town, so far away it shrank to the size of a button. I'd already known a new Sapling couldn't be too far away from the old one, but this was probably 200 kilometers at least.

There was even a deep gorge in between. I was quite sure the new Sapling could grow to maturity without being discovered.

...I wondered how that country was doing. Well, the place was sure to be crowding with watcher drones anyway, and it wasn't like I had all that much time to waste.

"Alright. Come on Blobsy, let's go back."

boing

As things were, it'd be risky to continue with the Southern Continent. We returned to the reborn Sapling and rode on the network, going back to the World Tree.

"The Dark Lady Fluffy Bunny decided to get started on her campaign of terror right away, I see."

"I saw that sudden announcement. So what's going to happen? Apparently the Sapling's gone and you can't use the Temple there anymore. Does it mean people from that country won't be able to revive anymore?"

"Looks like it. New players can no longer choose the country, while existing players there would see their bases as 'out of bounds' and get teleported to the closest country."

"I saw this in another game too, the thing where a human territory gets taken by the big bad and then you can't use the town services anymore. Though in that game you could retake the town by killing enough monsters without dying."

“Still no information on that front, huh. I haven’t seen any event quest to revive the destroyed Sapling either. Does that mean the monster players can live there now?”

“Hey peeps, so I bought the monster avatar DLC. And then on today’s morning, there’s a weird new quest. It says the objective is to ‘defeat the current Dark Lady and become the new Dark Lord/Lady’.”

“What? Monsters aren’t the Dark Lady’s allies? What’s with that?”

“According to what they said, that Fluffy Bunny isn’t a normal Dark Lord, she’s a world-destroying Demon. If the world is destroyed, it means the monsters will die off too, so the main goal of monster players is to grow stronger and become the new Dark Lord.”

“...that’s kinda different from what I imagined. I thought it’d be super cool to fight against humans under the Bunny’s banner, which was why I’d been thinking about buying the DLC, but now...”

“It kind of feels like the game direction is going all over the place, don’t you think? Like the game developers are flip-flopping.”

“That reminds me, what’s going to happen to that country now that the Temple’s unavailable? Is it going to turn into a hostile area full of monsters?”

“I can tell you about that, I picked Rantetrois as the spawn point back when I first signed up. Basically, the town got fucked up.”

“The Fluffy Bunny came there, right? Did you see her?”

“And it wasn’t just any normal destruction, either. There was a riot in front of a huge building, probably the king’s palace.

I could barely see my feet due to the fog. I thought the Bunny was fighting, but turned out it was all humans killing each other. Now the whole street’s fucked up by mosaics. Couldn’t see shit.”

“Oh, so by ‘fucked up’ you actually meant the town turned into a

pixelated mess...”

“So what’s going on in the Rantetrois region now?”

“I tested a few things out since I was nearby. Logging in and out still works at least, but if you die, you’ll randomly revive somewhere in your spawn country. But more importantly, monsters there are way too tough! Like the caterpillars. They must have gotten a 50% increase in stats.”

“The whole country’s an absolute mess now. I’m playing a monster avatar, and I can just go into villages just fine. They don’t have barriers anymore. The slaves ran off, the farmers are panicking and running from the black caterpillars eating their cabbages. I honestly wasn’t sure how I should be reacting.”

“I guess that country’s pretty much dead now.”

Near the northern edge of the Southern Continent lay the Principality of Rantetrois. With its Sapling destroyed, anything that used mana in the country were turning themselves off one after another.

With its high demand for mana, the first to go was the railway.

The locomotives did have magic stones as batteries, but they were only used to start the engine and as reserve mana in cases accidents occurred mid-way through a trip. In normal running, the rails supplied magic to the trains.

When the rails were no longer active, the trains stopped. Before starting up the train with the reserve mana battery, the conductors decided to call to ask about the situation. It was only then that they learned about the destruction of the Sapling.

The next to go were the lighting, plumbing, and other such essential utilities. The only bit of lamp oil and kindlings available were at the shops selling traveling goods. The people couldn’t even cook due to the lack of water. Unable to understand the situation, they fell into panic. Chaos reigned.

Next to fail were the magic equipment managing the slave collars, and almost at the same time, the barriers protecting towns and villages from monsters. Demihumans began their escape.

In farming villages with nothing but a simple fence, Fiend Wolves commenced their attacks, looking for livestock to feed on. The humans were still fending them off, but their own food supply was beginning to look dire. People were going into forests to get firewood despite lacking proper preparations, which often resulted in them being attacked by monsters. The situation was spiraling into unmitigated disaster.

The people in power took no time in escaping the country on express carriages, together with what valuables they could carry. Bit by bit, society unraveled. The Principality of Rantetrois was slowly turning into a wasteland.

The events that had transpired in the Southern Continent — the loss of a Sapling, and Rantetrois' ensuing descent into chaos — were being taken under serious considerations by the Central Continent, by nature a continent sensitive to information of all kinds. In contrast, the other continents did not attach as much importance to the matter. Perhaps they weren't even aware of it.

52 years ago, the 92nd Sapling was discovered, and a new country was born. Torbandeux, a relatively young island country.

However, no one was interested in it, due to the simple fact that the island had nothing but forests. Despite being the 92nd, it was only 18 years ago that development truly started, when one of the nobles of the 97th country, the large country Torbasept, decided to stake their claim.

Despite being called a 'country' due to possessing a Sapling, Torbandeux had only just recently become a small village. It had just the bare minimum of soldiers and about two thousand settlers.

Convenience and comfort were still far away, but the people were lively, full of spirit. There was no lack of smiles on their faces. Night after night, in taverns they declared their dream of turning their

village into a true *nation*. And working toward that dream were hundreds of beastmen slaving away without rest.

The Sapling still had nothing more than a simple fence surrounding it. Stakes were driven into it to gather mana. Standing on top of a fortress constructed a few years ago, the young governor of the country was watching the tree, all the while taking sips of alcohol.

And then, in front of him, the impossible happened. All of a sudden, the Sapling turned white.

“Wha...”

And shattered into dust.

Where the Sapling used to be, there now stood a girl, white rabbit ears drooping from her head. He stared at her, dumbfounded. She noticed him and gave him a gentle bow. Then she disappeared in a blink of an eye.

With the Sapling’s blessing now gone, Torbandeux returned to its true climate of a northern island. An abrupt blizzard ravaged the village. The citizens could do nothing but ran for their own lives, leaving their demihumans slaves behind.

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Lesser Archdemon Lv. 3]

☐The rabbit demon of Laplace. Trickster and guide of man’s fate.

[Magic Points: 15200/18700] 3100↑

[Total Combat Power: 17000/20500] 3400↑

[Unique Skill: <Causality Alteration> <Cyber-Manipulation> <Absorption> <Materialization>]

[Racial Skill: <Fear> <Mist Form>]

[Simple Identification] [Human Form (Wonderful)] [Subspace Inventory]

Chapter 44 CITY OF PLEASURE

I saw some strange monster avatars.

They *were* avatars, right...? I saw them when I was at the coast near Soixansept Kingdom. The country itself was situated on a landmass southwest from the Central Continent that seemed to be unsure whether it wanted to be a continent or an archipelago.

Looking at the guidebook, the countries here seemed to have quite the South American-ish atmosphere to them. The large country Soixansept Kingdom reminded me of the tropical paradises back on Earth. It was also one of the most famous tourist destinations on this world. The surrounding countries weren't much different with their resorts and developed tourism.

But my original plan wasn't to go to Soixansept. I had wanted to ride the World Tree network to the neighboring country, Sanhuit. Just as always, I bounced off its barrier, but in a way that put me on a trajectory toward a reef near Soixansept.

...No, I'm not sulking.

Blobsy cleaned off the seawater and seaweed on my cloak in a jiffy.

Considering my landing spot, I had thought to might as well take the chance to look around the nearby country. Some time later, on a beach some way away from a port town, I saw a few adventurers fighting against several monsters.

The adventurers were a party of three. Their combat power were all below 100. They all had similar, familiar-looking equipment, and their movements were somewhat awkward. Maybe they were players.

Their opponents were three monsters.

A black donkey, an evil-looking goat, and a rooster with a snake for a tail. They were standing on each other like the town musicians of Bremen.

...monsters? Were they really just normal monsters?

All three only had around 60 to 70 combat power. Yet as a totem pole, they were practically wiping the floor with the players.

Yeah, they were totally players using monster avatars here.

I was honestly surprised the game developers actually went through with it. Still, their movements looked rigid, all three sharing the same kind of inflexibility. Were they controlling the avatars in semi-automatic mode, then?

The scene just looked like a group of ex-beta players bullying the newbies, really... Well, whatever. Not like they were harming anyone. I got ready to leave them to their business.

Suddenly, an unexpected breeze blew past. I instantly held down my hood, but it took me a single beat later to do the same with my skirt.

“Eep!”

The skirt was just reflex, really. When materialized, layers of cloth filled the inside to the brim. Just a bit of wind wasn’t enough to reveal anything.

I looked around. Dozens of meters away, the player and the monster parties were no longer fighting each other. All of them had already dropped to the ground, their gazes fixed on my direction.

“...”

“...” “...” “...”

In a blink of an eye, that particular part of the beach and the blue ocean behind it froze over.

...I had more important things to worry about than such frivolities anyway. I was quite sure I didn’t show my ears, but that attack just now might have just brought suspicions my way.

I needed to leave right away. Unfortunately, the World Tree network was unavailable to me until I destroyed and revived another Sapling, and so I could only rely on my own power. I departed before the watcher drones could flock to the scene.

I stayed human and sprinted straight north from Soixansept, hugging the western coastline and ignoring Santseis, a small country I

encountered on my path. Once I reached the rugged, uneven forest to the north, I turned full mist and flew through, exiting to the sea.

Twenty thousand combat power was no joke. I wasn't as fast as an airship, obviously, but I could keep pace with an express train. This continent was really more like two smaller ones connected by a bit of land, so by cutting through the sea, I could save a ton of travel time.

It still took three days without rest. I came to the upper half of the continent not just to escape, but also because there were two large countries there.

Wartos, the City of Pleasure.

Sautonn, the City of Gambling.

As you could see from their titles, the two countries weren't exactly *wholesome*. Similarly, the word 'City' reflected the fact that these two nations' government and population were concentrated in their capital cities. The countries themselves weren't actually all that big.

Still, they were among the richest countries in the world. And in both countries, the mafia held more power than the royalty. It was the reason why the guidebook recommended the unexperienced tourists to never stray from the main streets.

Wartos had shops where you could buy and use some seriously nasty drugs. And Sautonn, well, just imagine a Las Vegas without human rights.

I chose this region because I thought most normal players wouldn't come here. And because I was thinking that since the place was full of bad people, people who didn't like being watched or observed — one of the more decent preconceptions I had — then that probably meant they were more magically vigilant. Which meant less watcher drones. Maybe.

Hopefully.

In other words, it was just another one of my harebrained plans.

Well, those weren't exactly the only reasons, though...

Three days later, I arrived at the coast near Wartos. I turned human, wore my cloak, and headed toward the City of Pleasure. First off, I'd

need to find a way to get in.

To be honest, I was nervous trying to attack a large country. Still, considering the current situation, I had a chance of success.

Some time later, a large city showed up in my view. From afar, I saw buildings meshing together like a messy jigsaw puzzle. And I was quite sure the dangerously-colored cloud of smog covering the whole city wasn't just my imagination.

There was a line of merchant carriages in front of the main gate, coming either to buy or to sell more drugs. Border control was taking quite a long time for each one. I wondered if they were being careful of foreign mafia and spies?

But despite their vigilance, the security itself wasn't all that tough.

People in other continents were still not taking what I was doing seriously. They thought it wasn't their problem yet. They were only worrying about spies, not about existential threats to their nations.

And with how the mafia held more power than the king, their soldiers and knights were powerless. Their military wasn't even enough to protect the whole country.

I wouldn't dare try this in other countries, but with how thick the fog and how thin their security were, it might just be possible for me to turn into mist and pass right through the front gate, the only hole in the barrier.

I approached the gate, using the nearby bushes as cover. Then I dispersed myself into thin mist and quietly drifted through the gate. With my mastery of the human form, I might be able to pass through the barrier that way, but let's leave the experimentation for when it's safer.

The moment I flew through the gates, incredulity showed on the gatekeepers' faces for a moment. Then they took a long drag of their bizarre-smelling pipes and puffed out smoke, looking on cloud nine. My worries were unfounded, it seemed.

I walked up to a street stall selling what looked to be some kind of taco. I bought a portion and asked the owner my question. "Can you

tell me where the king's palace is?"

The middle-aged man replied even as he continued cooking the tortillas. He sounded bored.

"What, you aiming to join the harem too? Forget about it, girl. Sure you'll be rich, but you'll get your brain melted from all the drugs there."

Then he flicked his head to show me the direction.

It was somewhere in the center of the city... no surprises there, I supposed, considering the city was built around the Sapling.

Well then, how should I go about this? Honestly, with how the city was, I could probably just turn mist to slip right inside the palace. Still, this was a large country. I had no idea what sort of traps they had set around the Sapling.

And even if things went smoothly, I still wanted the human race to notice what I did. At the very least, I wanted to make sure they remembered it this time.

Likely, the mafia also had their own combatants to supplement the lack of soldiers and knights of this country. A head-on fight was risky until I knew how much they had.

Still, my chances were good.

As the first step of my plan, I walked around town, pretend-eating my food while acting the part of a starry-eyed country bumpkin. The bait didn't take long to get a bite.

"Hey there, little lady. I have some good stuff here. Want some?" A 'town pharmacist' called out to me.

"...how much?"

The suspicious-looking leaves and ointments basically ranged from about 1 to 5 small silvers.

"Mister, do you have anything better?" I said, flashing him a large gold coin and further tipping him a silver. He beamed.

"Whoa hoh, little lady, aren't you quite the connoisseur? Sure we do,

but it's back at the office. I don't have it on me right now. And if you can handle the price, we can help out with getting you a place to stay and demihuman slaves to play with, too."

"Can you show me your place?"

It'd be troublesome if he decided he wanted to sell me off, like what happened to me before, so I tipped him another silver and played the part of a generous customer. He suddenly changed his tone of voice.

"Well then, my lady, please come thisaway!"

I wondered if they had some sort of fixation with the idea that people in their trade weren't supposed to have offices on the main streets; after passing through an absolute *labyrinth* of alleyways, we entered the warehouse district. I was guided to an old three-story mansion.

"Yo Boss, we've got an amazing customer here!"

The man shouted out as we entered the building. Deeper inside, a man who looked about forty stopped working on his documents and stood up. He walked toward us with a grin on his face.

The boss looked from my face, still covered in my hood, to the heels visible from under the hem of my cloak and quietly nodded. He led me into a meeting room.

"All right, lady. What would you like?"

"Something long-lasting and with little after-effect. How much of it can you supply?"

"How much do you want?"

"Let's see... enough to fill five full horse carriages, for the time being." I casually said.

The boss blinked. "...we do have something. The kind that the Central Continent banned for being too *intense*. Not enough to fill five carriages, but our storehouse in the back should have enough for four. Lady, do you have the money? A single carriage of it is going to run you a hundred large golds."

"Oh, don't worry about it..."

"W-Wha..."

I got what I needed to hear, so I froze the whole floor. I shattered the iced-over door and headed toward the back storehouses.

I began my search, freezing whomever I encountered on the way. Then I found out there were *multiple* storehouses.

“...I really should have asked them to guide me there first before doing that...”

Apparently this base belonged to one of the larger mafia families. I thought I was just dealing with medium-sized group.

Oh well, what's done is done. I wondered if maybe I should go look for survivors or wait until someone else returned. As I kept on searching for the storehouse, suddenly, I heard something from my side.

“Ook!”

...hello, mister... monkey?

“Ook!”

I saw a small baby monkey around thirty-centimeters tall. He had whitish fluffy fur except for his hands, feet, tip of tail, and face, where the color switched to pitch-black. Sort of like a panda.

I *think* Earth had monkeys with similar colors too. This one, however, was looking a lot more like a stuffed animal than an actual living one, with his beady blue eyes and soft downy fur.

The ball of fluff was sitting on a table, looking at me. What was he doing here? Was he merchandise to be sold? I thought he was a monster... wait a minute... he's not a monster player, right?

“...” I gave him a mild glare.

“Ook!”

The baby monkey shook his head, as if to say “no way!”

What was up with him? I wondered. Then he slapped his hand a few times on... oh. There was a thin chain anchoring his leg to the table.

“...you want me to cut it?”

“Oook!”

He seemed awfully used to humans. Had he been a pet before? But then again, he was trying to escape...

[Baby Monkey] [Race: Black-White Monkey]

[Magic Points: 15/15] [Hit Points: 15/15]

[Total Combat Power: 15]

So he really was just a normal monkey monster...

“Oook!”

Seeing me still cautious, he pulled out a mini-banana.

“What? You’ll give it to me if I cut the chain?”

“Oook!”

“Wait, no, another banana wouldn’t... Blobsy?!”

The little slime bounced on the table. The monkey handed over his bananas, and Blobsy happily took them.

Did he just bribe her?!

“Okay, fine... Hey, do you know where they keep the really bad drugs?” I asked without much expectations.

“Oook!” He confidently pounded his chest, seemingly to say “leave it to me!”

“Oook!”

I cut his leg manacles with my fingers. He began guiding me through the storehouse with his newfound freedom.

“Oook!”

“No, I don’t need coffee.”

“Oook!”

“Not the strongbox, either... but maybe might as well...”

Did he *really* understand where I wanted to go, here...?

I couldn't keep calling him 'him' all the time... let's see... he kind of looked like a panda with his colors, so let's call him Panda.

Panda (provisional name) led me everywhere, from the leisure room to the offices. Then we came to a caged aquarium.

“Is something here?”

“Ook!”

So here was where the mafia kept some other kind of monster as pets like they did this little guy, then? As I peered into the water, I heard a voice from inside.

“...Is someone there?”

There was a small girl with dark blue hair inside the water. She had a fish's tail from her waist down.

“...a mermaid?”

“Who are you, miss?”

Turned out they weren't keeping a monster. They were keeping an aquatic demihuman. I showed my rabbit ears to calm her down, and we started talking. According to her, the population of merfolk demihumans had sharply decreased due to human hunters. Now, the only home the merfolks had were the region around the island to the west of Wartos.

Even that island had a small country named Lontrois. Their main industry was fishing (normal fish), and capture and export of merfolks. This girl had, unfortunately, been caught in a net, then sold to Wartos.

She had stayed here for a while. If the mafia hadn't been careful when talking around her, she might even know where they kept the drugs. And when I asked her, it turned out she really did.

“...can you go home from a river?”

“Yeah! I’m really good at swimming!”

“Ook!”

“Did he wanted me to save the girl too...?” I muttered.

Well, coincidence or not, the important thing was that I knew where the dangerous drugs were now. I asked the mermaid girl to see if she knew anything about Panda. She said he was a type of monster called a Monochrome Monkey. Very smart. Could do quite a lot of things, including acting as lookouts.

I wrapped a spare cloak around the mermaid girl, carried her from the warehouse district, and released her into a large river that directly connected to the sea.

“Thank you, miss rabbit! Come play with me some time!”

“Sure.”

She waved, then dove under the water surface, disappearing from my sight.

Yeah... I'll come see you soon. I needed to destroy that country's Sapling too, anyway.

“Ook!”

bounce

“Yeah, that was a nice thing I did, wasn’t it?”

Now let’s do something *bad*.

Wartos, the City of Pleasure. Of fine wine, fine food, and fine women. The laws allowed for any and all forms of drugs.

The city prided itself on being able to supply any kind of pleasure imaginable.

While it was also the income source of the mafia and a hotbed for criminal activities, with nobles all over the world being its customers,

no other kingdom would lay a hand on them.

On that day's evening, the capital was quite a bit foggier than usual.

With the country being how it was, nearly all of its inns had equipment to serve drug-using guests. The devices dumped the indoor smoke and steam outside. It was the cause for the constant thin layer of fog.

So even if the fog was a little bit thicker than normal, and even if it neatly covered the center of the capital, no one took notice. Not the citizens, not the visitors, and not the mafia.

But then, people started noticing a faint sweet smell. One after another, people not used to its powerful intoxicating effect fell victim to nausea and paralysis. Those somewhat more experienced were the unfortunate ones; some were rendered insensate, while some lost all control over their impulses. Riots broke out here and there.

The cause of it all came from a certain warehouse belonging to the Zell Family, one of the top five mafia factions in Wartos. Over four thousand large gold coins' worth of drugs were burned, without any semblance of restraint, to begin the city's silent downfall.

Many were witnesses to the sight of a single girl of white, rabbit ears fluttering, on her jaunt toward the king's palace.

None could even twitch a finger, let alone stopping her.

In front of the palace, the girl snapped a finger, and the gates opened for her. She passed without opposition.

A few hours later, magical equipment all across the country began ceasing operation due to the destruction of the Sapling.

By the time the fog cleared, the suspected culprit could no longer be found.

The next day, with the news of the fall of the City of Pleasure, many eyes turned to Wartos to search for the white rabbit girl reported to have appeared there. And then, as if to make mockeries out of them all, she showed up in the neighboring island country of Lontrois. With another Sapling destroyed, she once again vanished like smoke.

After dealing with the Sapling of Lontrois, the country selling merfolks, I jumped on the newly constructed network line to go back to the World Tree.

“I’m back.”

I said, not exactly expecting to hear a reply. Yet as if in response, the branches of the World Tree lightly swayed, allowing a bit of the sun’s warmth to reach me.

Another two Saplings destroyed and revived. In the process, I discovered an interesting application of <Causality Alteration>: If the person who had closed a door or gate was nearby, I could make them ‘failed’ to have closed it.

Really, it was just a little trick with limited usefulness. If the one to have closed the door weren’t nearby, or if they had died, it wouldn’t have worked.

Lontrois was incomparably smaller than Wartos. The governor’s mansion was no bigger than the size of an elementary school. I just needed to show up at night, unlocked the doors and disabled the traps with that trick, and that was it. I was at the Sapling. If they had stricter security, I wouldn’t have been able to do it that way.

Anyway, I got more powerful again.

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Lesser Archdemon Lv. 5]

☐The rabbit demon of Laplace. Trickster and guide of man’s fate.

[Magic Points: 22300/25400] 6700↑

[Total Combat Power: 24800/27900] 7400↑

[Unique Skill: <Causality Alteration> <Cyber-Manipulation> <Absorption> <Materialization>]

[Racial Skill: <Fear> <Mist Form>]

[Simple Identification] [Human Form (Wonderful)] [Subspace Inventory]

You think so too, right, Blobsy?

boing!

“Oook!”

“...wha?”

Why was Panda here?!

[Panda] [Race: Monochrome Monkey] [Kin of Shedy, the Demon]

[Magic Points: 20/20] [Hit Points: 20/20]

[Total Combat Power: 20]

...aww hell, not again.

Chapter 46 THE EMPEROR’S TRAP

I had another Kin now. Panda, the monkey.

The phrase ‘Demon’s Kin’ made them sound like they were some Big Bad Evil Monsters that fought on my behalf, but really, both Blobsy and Panda were just there to be cute.

Still, it wasn’t like they were all useless otherwise. Blobsy really helped with the laundry, cleaning, and disposal of evidence. I was sure Panda had some kind of helpful ability too.

“Hey, Panda, what can you do?”

“Oook!”

He presented to me a tiny banana as his reply.

Bananas...? I guess bananas were important too. The two of them were munching on the fruit again.

...well, whatever. Even if they had a hundred times their current combat power, I wouldn’t take them out to fight anyway.

I had destroyed and revived four out of the ninety-nine Saplings of this world. To me, it was just the first steps. To the parasitic human race, it was an unprecedented disaster.

The corporation's mana gathering must have stalled. They were likely to get even more careful now, to keep their players

– their sources of money and free labor – from getting suspicious.

I had no idea what they could be up to anyway. In the end, the only thing I could do was to keep my guard up as I continued on my quest.

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Lesser Archdemon Lv. 5]

☐The rabbit demon of Laplace. Trickster and guide of man's fate.

[Magic Points: 22,300/25,400]

[Total Combat Power: 24,800/27,900]

**[Unique Skill: <Causality Alteration> <Cyber-Manipulation>
<Absorption> <Materialization>]**

[Racial Skill: <Fear> <Mist Form>]

[Simple Identification] [Human Form (Wonderful)] [Subspace Inventory]

My magic had passed twenty-five thousand, and my combat power was nearing thirty. Compared to the wild rabbit that I used to be when I just started out, I might as well be a dragon now.

Having to get stronger all the time was really *such* a pain, but I didn't have any other choice. If I took too long, the secret beta testers would catch up in power.

“Ook.”

boing

Sure, sure, Panda. Actually, where are you getting those bananas from?

The World Tree and its Saplings were the cornerstones that held up Yggdrasia. The mana taken from them was an indispensable part of life to the human race, and also the backbone of human prosperity.

Mana had allowed for the creation of high-quality weapons, the monster-repelling barrier, and the large-bore, long-range magical cannon that could *slaughter* a young dragon – a monster with over ten-thousand combat power – with ease (even if it required a direct pipeline to a Sapling, consumed a huge amount of mana, and needed several people to operate).

Weapons weren't the only thing mana had helped create. From the intense heat of magical flame came refined iron and other metals, which served as crucial materials for the manufacture of high-quality industrial goods. Spells were used to reinforce structures. The people had even discovered the secret of constructing high-rise buildings not too long ago.

More directly relevant to the common person's life was the protection the Saplings granted against the climate. Mankind no longer needed to fight against nature itself just to live.

Produce grew quickly in lands abundant with mana, and even quicker when subjected to further mana injection. Hunger was non-existent.

Magical stoves had removed the need for wood and coal, and water was effectively limitless with the help of magitools.

With the technology and industrial equipment granted by God, humans had developed high-speed transportation in the form of express trains and airships. The reach of humankind was slowly growing to cover the whole world.

Yet now, four of those Saplings had been destroyed in succession.

Despite losing the blessing of mana, the people still clung to their land. They struggled in desperation to get back on their feet. But with the cessation of the railway – and accordingly, the circulation of luxury goods – the wealthy and the merchants were the first to leave. The country was devastated. Some people had resorted to looting just to survive, which gave birth to a deluge of refugees.

There had been whispers, rumors that this was a plot by a demon to destroy the world. All the same, with how the rest of the world was still having the leeway to accept the refugees, the people living far away from the incident were yet to be alarmed. They only tightened their security, at most. They weren't seeing this as the crisis it was.

If anything, countries all over the world were even *trying* to capture

the rabbit beastman girl they called the Fluffy Bunny (a nickname that had spread from the adventurers since who knew when) who was purported to be behind it all. To that end, they sought the help of the adventurers and the Temple to set a trap for her.

Touze Empire, a large country in the Central Continent, was no exception.

“Damn that Shedy, what the hell is she thinking?!”

Within his office, the young emperor Tischlar von Touze muttered in exasperation. His eyes were scanning over pages after pages of newspapers from all over the world, all delivered after just a single day’s delay thanks to the airships.

His country had made quite a bit of a fuss when they heard he issued a bounty of five thousand large gold coins for a single beastman. He shut them up by paying from his personal pocket.

With how much the bounty was worth, he had expected information about her to be pouring into the Empire. Yet despite there being not a single trace of Shedy using the airships, she was still popping up all over the world out of nowhere, practically making a mockery of the Empire’s intelligence network.

His aged butler, the man who had watched him grown up since he was a baby, was preparing his tea. He chastised Tiz with a small sigh.

“Boy, your face doesn’t match your words.”

“Heh. That so?”

Even with his exasperation, Tiz was faintly smiling. He looked like he’d found something *fun*.

As long as the prosperity of his Empire and citizens wasn’t being threatened, Tiz couldn’t care less for whatever disaster was befalling the other countries. He didn’t see the hand behind this atrocity to be the world’s enemy. To him, Shedy was his possession. His toy.

Salia de Lence, leader of Tiz’s personal bodyguards and an Imperial Knight, ground her teeth in frustration as she looked upon his smile.

The vile beastman girl had stolen the attention of her beloved lord. He

might be thinking to take the girl as his pet, but Salia swore that once the opportunity showed itself, she would kill the girl with her own hands.

“However, there is no guarantee that rabbit beastman girl is truly ‘Shedy’. According to eyewitness reports, she had looked halfway through her teenage years, around 14-15 years old. We should be prepared for the possibility the two are different people. With that said, I don’t think there could be any other white-colored young rabbit beastman girl.”

“Yeah. So how’s our preparations for the trap?”

“It seems she might be avoiding the Central Continent. At the very least, she would not be easily lured to this Empire where she knew you were, boy.”

“I told you, stop it with the ‘boy’ already, gramps.”

Tiz leaned back on his chair, crossing his arms and lightly frowning at the implication. He stared at the old butler.

“So what’s your plan, gramps?”

“It is not exactly a plan, per se... The one to have reached the conclusion that she was avoiding the Central Continent was a scholar of the Temple, and he had requested an audience with you. I have scheduled it for this afternoon.”

The scholar who showed up was a man around Tiz’s age. He called himself Mason.

The young maids staying back near the walls started tittering and squealing as soon as they caught sight of him. He was tall, with short, neat dark-brown hair, fine features, and an aura of calmness. At the same time, his eyes glinted with the ferocity of a shark. If there were players here to see him, they might have thought he was an elite businessman coming from one of the top corporations of Earth, instead of just a simple Temple scholar.

“I am honored to have been granted an audience, Your Majesty.”

“Can it with the greetings. Talk.”

Mason nodded for a fraction “Then I shall begin...”

He was a researcher in the field of human psychology and statistics. He claimed to have calculated the likelihood of where the rabbit beastman girl may attack next by looking at the locations and order in which she appeared, her movement path, time between attacks, and other data points.

“We have discovered three countries that were likely to become the target. On top of the list is a certain small country. We humbly request the full cooperation of Touze Empire to set a trap for the rabbit there.”

To the south-east of the Central Island where the Tree was, there were three continents around the size of Australia.

Two large countries and five small ones occupied the landmasses. Despite their Saplings being discovered quite a bit earlier than the City of Pleasure’s, they weren’t all that developed. They had nice, comfortable climates, but that was it.

They had no special industries. The only thing they had going for them were the isolated ecosystems, which attracted adventurers coming to hunt subspecies monsters.

According to the newest guidebook I bought last time, the large country Quasix always had 400,000 people inside it at any given time, but their actual citizen population was only 150,000. The rest were composed of adventurers of *wilder* leanings, plus the merchants buying monster materials from them. Tourists were recommended to be careful.

...they were being way too loose with their information. Had the people of this world gotten complacent from the long-lasting peace?

“Well then, let’s go.”

boing

“Ook!”

Blobsy jumped on my shoulder, while Panda clung to my calf. Panda’s spot was normally my arm when I wasn’t wearing the cloak, or my hips or legs when I was. The locations themselves weren’t a problem, but Panda eating bananas and littering the peels while clinging to me

was.

Stop that. You're setting a bad example for Blobsy.

My destination this time was the southern continent of the group of continents I mentioned, the one with two countries on it. Xontdix and Quarrevings, a large and small country, respectively.

I did think attacking two large countries in a row was dangerous, to be honest. All the same, I still chose this region, mainly because they had more adventurers than citizens. Which meant public order there wouldn't be very good.

Xontdix's ruler was also called the Mercenary King. Over a hundred years ago, a mercenary had exterminated the lizardmen there and taken the Sapling, and the country had gone into the hands of their descendants thereafter. Even until now, the country still had a meathead for a king. It was an *awesome* country.

It had quite a lot of powerful soldiers and adventurers, apparently. Of course, I got much stronger myself too, so unless something unexpected happened, I was confident there wouldn't be a problem.

The lack of public order stemmed from the fact that a large part of the population was composed of thugs and ruffians, and these people tended to solve problems by themselves. It hinted at the fragility of their police force.

The country had a lot of adventurers, true, and I did pick a bit of a fight with the players back then. Still, it was just a small group of players. I thought it was about time the mess was forgotten.

As always, I bounced off the barrier. My landing spot was a dense forest with absolutely zero signs of human civilization.

Before, I would've had problems orienting myself. Now, I could vaguely sense the direction of the World Tree at all time.

I wondered if it was because I had gained more power, or because I leveled up.

All the same, if I didn't know where I was, that sense of direction wouldn't really mean anything. I didn't know if I should go west or east. West would be the right choice if I had landed in the middle of

the continent, but if I landed on the edge, I would have no idea where I'd end up.

"...where do you think I should go?"

boing

"Ook."

The two pointed to the east. *No, Panda, I don't need a banana.* I had thought I should go west, but well, they pointed east, so let's go there.

I put my two Kins into **[Inventory]**, dispersed into mist, and got moving.

One whole day of high-speed flying later, I saw a farming village and patrolling watcher drones nearby. I turned human and followed along the road, hiding in what cover I could find and ignoring the farming village. After a while, a decently large town showed up in my view.

I had no idea what country this was. And as this small continent only had two countries, asking for the name would make me look too shady.

I found a railway track on the way and used it to sneak inside the town. At the station, I finally learned where I was.

"Welcome to Quarrevings!"

What the hell, this was the exact opposite of where I wanted to go!

boing

"Ook."

Blobsy and Panda, already outside of my inventory, just tilted their heads. Then they started eating bananas.

Oh, fine then... focus, focus. No one was to blame. If I had to, I supposed I could only blame my luck.

This wasn't what I had planned, but now that I was here, I might as well try to get some information. I headed toward the adventurer's guild.

...wasn't the atmosphere of the town a bit weird? Maybe it was just how it was. I'd never been here before, after all.

Looked very busy, with all the adventurers running around and making travel preparations. The air felt charged with tension.

...no, something really was off here.

I immediately changed my plan, instead heading for a clothier for adventurers some way away from the guild.

I took the chance to get a few more spare coats and hooded cloaks. The shopkeeper at the counter was a woman in her late twenties. I attempted a casual chat with her.

"Did something happen? The town looks weird."

"Oh, you didn't know? Were you on a long hunting trip? If you have any spare materials, you can sell it to me."

She seemed to be quite a chatterbox. I didn't have anything good, so I shared with her some of the drugs I got from the City of Pleasure. After a few more meaningless back-and-forth, her lips were loosened.

"A few days ago, the guild in the neighboring country Xontdix just called for a gathering of adventurers. I didn't know what for. Apparently they were only required to stay there for ten days. Even if nothing happened, as long as they were Rank 3 or above, they'd get paid one small gold coin."

"Hmmm... I wonder why."

"Oh yes, that reminds me. I've been seeing new adventurers coming to this town recently. Those people were saying something about a bunny trapping... quest? I think it was 'quest'. The old-timers here just laughed and made fun of them, saying there was no such thing, but when I asked the new adventurers directly, they played dumb in a hurry. I asked a few others too, and the same thing happened. How curious."

"Bunny..."

Gotta be me, right...? I didn't know how large-scale it was going to be, but considering the adventurers were gathered by the guild itself and that the players were most likely aware of the details, there was a

high chance the corporation had a direct hand in this.

A trap, perhaps. If I'd gone to Xontdix instead, I might have been caught wholly flat-footed.

I gave Panda and Blobsy a few headpats.

Hey, did you two guide me here because you knew that country was dangerous? ...no, not that, I don't want bananas, that's not what my headpats meant.

I gave my thanks to the shopkeeper woman. Just as I was about to leave, she spoke out, looking like she had just suddenly remembered something else.

"Oh yes, I heard that the emperor of Touze would be there in Xontdix incognito. Really, with how famous he was, he shouldn't have bothered trying to sneak about. You're quite cute, you know? If you catches his eyes, maybe he'll even let you be one of his mistresses."

So Tiz was coming? Interesting. *Very* interesting.

If the corporation also had a hand in this, that meant either he was cooperating with them, or that the two were trying to use one another. I might not know how serious he was, but if he wanted to make me his slave that much, then I had an answer of my own.

"...Blobsy, Panda. You two are with me all the way, right?"

boing!

"Ook!"

They responded with solemnity. Seemed like they'd realized the subtle *change* within me.

I waited until dark, then made my move.

The Sapling in Quarrevings' capital was inside the governor's castle, a stone fortress as large as a baseball stadium. It was protected by a surrounding moat and a simple barrier. I didn't try to go through the barrier, instead infiltrating through the sewers that connected to the moat.

A metal grate with a grid spacing of around 30 centimeters blocked my way. There was no barrier here, so I simply turned mist to go through.

I wouldn't kill anyone this time. Any demihumans slaves I saw would be ignored.

Not only was the security unusually loose, it even looked like there were less guards around. Perhaps the people were all going to Xontdix.

I moved, keeping myself hidden and away from the eyes of the patrolling guards and watcher drones. After a few hours, I reached the Sapling.

I could only use this sort of plan only once, really. They'd be *very* careful to not let the same thing happen again afterward. I had thought about keeping this to be my trump card until I had no other choice, but it'd probably be fine. By then I'd have already gotten a lot stronger anyway.

There might not be any workers around to harvest the Sapling's mana, but there was a watcher drone staying on guard 24/7.

I came as close as I could without being discovered, then slowly reached out to the Sapling with a bit of faint mist. Once the mist touched, I was intensely aware of the horrible condition it was in.

I really want to save you right now, but... sorry. Just a bit longer. I swear you'll be reborn, soon.

I cut off a bit of my mist, telling it to burrow into the Sapling's roots. My maximum magic went down a thousand. Still, this was necessary.

Every time my level of Lesser Archdemon increased, I could feel myself changing bit by bit.

Not negatively, no. It felt more like the *true* self that I'd been burying deep inside me ever since my childhood, so that I could survive, was now being let out. Step by step, it was inching closer to freedom.

Step by step, I was changing.

I was changing into a **[Demon]** by my own will.

“All right. Panda, if you’d please.”

“Ook.”

The little monkey confidently nodded. He gave me a banana.

It turned out that by leaving a part of me inside the Sapling and having one of my Kins near it, the network link to that Sapling would then be partially available to me. With Panda staying back, I used the now-active Quarrevings connection to go back to the World Tree.

“Let’s go.”

boing

We immediately left for the continent above Quarrevings. That one had the large country Quasix, but it wasn’t a country I could conquer quickly enough in a head-on fight. That left the two other small countries.

As usual, I bounced off the barrier and landed somewhere unfamiliar. With the awareness of the Tree’s and Panda’s locations in my mind, I quickly gained an approximation of my location. I moved toward the small country Chisept to the east.

According to the guidebook, the three countries on this continent were allied nations, with very strong ties to each other.

I arrived at Chisept after half a day’s travel. The security they had was still only to defend against other humans, so I easily slipped through. I did the same thing to the Sapling there, sending a part of me inside it to take over the connection.

I left Blobsy there, then transit through the World Tree to go to Xontdix.

Finally, it was time to crack the trap wide open.

Inside the royal palace’s guest manor, Tiz was lounging around on a wicker sofa, sending a grumpy look to his ex-classmate sitting nearby. The other man was smiling. *Sexily*, at that.

“Heeeey, Tizzy. You sure that bunny’s gonna show up? It’s been four days. Fooooouuur!”

“According to that Temple researcher, we should wait for ten days at least. If she still doesn’t show up by then, that means she’s going for the other countries high up on the list. Also, can you *please* speak normally?”

Tiz had come here to Xontdix to set a trap for Shedy, even if he didn’t quite trust the Temple scholar’s vague conjectures and numbers. Still, it was the only lead he had. Plus, Mason had been awfully eloquent in his presentation. Tiz thought it was worth a try, at least.

“That guy was called Mason, right? Yeah, so the guy also showed up at my place and told me the same thing. I thought he looked fishy as all hell, so I kicked him out. Looked *mighty* fine though. A pity he wasn’t even a little bit scared of me.

Like, that’s just rude.”

“...huh, he wasn’t? That’s amazing.”

Tiz looked at his friend. Then he revised his opinion of Mason, just a little bit.

So Mason had come here to Xontdix first, then. The country he had predicted to have the highest chance Shedy would attack.

The Temples were an international power. Xontdix could not ignore them, and so the talking had been entrusted to Tiz’s classmate and close friend, who then proceeded to reject the whole deal on the grounds that it was ‘dubious’. Which was why Mason had come to negotiate with Tiz to get the young emperor’s help in convincing Xontdix.

“Teehee, you know me so well, Tiz!”

“...well, we *do* go way back, after all.”

Aslan von Xontdix. Crown Prince of Xontdix.

The two had become friends when they were studying abroad in the Academy City Cinqres. At 220 centimeters in height, the dark-skinned man was a giant. Short haired, with an aura of youthful liveliness.

Despite the impression one might get from hearing him talk, he had

no interest in crossdressing, nor did he like men exclusively. He was simply in love with all things cute and/or beautiful. Salia, Tiz's bodyguard, had good enough looks to have been asked out by Aslan. It was one of the few times she showed fear.

And if Mason didn't even bat an eye at the prince's advances, the scholar must've had nerves of steel.

"And you had *such* a cute butt back then! What a waste, Tiz. If only you never grew up from being that adorable boy."

"Shut up... which reminds me, with how much you like cute stuff, I thought you'd be more excited."

"What about?"

"Shedy... the bunny, I mean. She's cute too, you know?"

"But she's a beastman, right? I like playing with slaves, sure, but I'm not interested in taking care of them. Like, if I'm going to have a pet, a lion would be better."

"Well, yeah, no wonder... you kill your pets all the time."

The prince kept wild beasts in his room. With the blessed physique he was born with, he would choke them to death whenever they misbehaved. It was his hobby.

He used to have beastman slaves. With how often he was killing them, the king had forbidden him to own slaves.

"She's mine, you know?" Tiz said.

"Nah, I don't care. As long as you're the one paying the adventurers and that the bounty money goes to us, she's all yours."

As they talked, the room door opened. The Temple scholar Mason and one of Xontdix's civil officials walked in.

"Your Majesty, Your Royal Highness, we are sincerely grateful for your cooperation. We have gathered the required amount of adventurers of Rank 3 and above, and they are currently within the knight's training ground."

"I see. Got it."

“Eheheh, this is gonna be fun!”

Tiz and Aslan led their personal knights toward the training ground. Behind Tiz, Salia was tightly gripping her sword, white-knuckled. She looked like a woman heading for war.

There were over a hundred adventurers of Rank 3 and above in the training ground. Nearly a thousand knights stood at attention in a circle, surrounding the adventurers.

Following a short greeting from the Emperor of Touze and the Crown Prince of Xontdix, Mason began the explanation for the adventurers’ gathering.

“Your main mission will be to guard the Sapling. The duration is ten days, just as we’ve mentioned in our announcement.

Even if nothing happens, you’ll still be compensated with one small gold coin. In case enemies appear, your reward will be increased depending on your contribution.”

The adventurers nodded. Many among them – players – were looking obviously apprehensive, their weapons ready for combat at any time. Their strange attitude garnered looks of skepticism from the native adventurers.

“First off... please search for anyone around you whose faces are hidden!”

At once, the adventurers blanched.

The adventurers were assembled in order to set a trap for the ‘rabbit beastman’.

She was attacking the World Tree Saplings for reasons unknown. If adventurers were gathered up in the castle, it was likely the rabbit would take the chance to infiltrate. To that end, the country had purposely relaxed their adventurer identity checks for the time being.

The moment the adventurers realized the assailant might be among them, they pointed their weapons to anyone still hiding their faces behind hoods, demanding them to reveal themselves. They complied, except for a single girl.

Several adventurers moved to surround her. The moment they reached out their hands, they were met with an explosion of mist, instantly turning them into ice.

Her claws shattered the frozen sculptures, and she threw off her cloak. Tiz, standing on stage, was greeted with the sight of a bewitching young woman of scarlet and snow. She was no longer that little rabbit girl he saw once before. He stared at her like a man lovestruck.

“Shedy...!”

Upon hearing his voice, Shedy turned her chilly gaze toward the stage. She gave him the faintest of smiles.

“Capture her!!”

With the command of a knight squadron leader, the adventurers shook off their stupor. They charged.

Shedy jumped over the carpet of swords and spears, freezing the wielders. Then she pointed her palm toward the stage and squeezed.

Driven by pure instinct, several knights jumped in front of Tiz’s group to cover for their lords. The veteran knights all collapsed in pools of blood, their old wounds reopened.

“Damn you! What did you do?!”

Aslan roared at the impossible sight.

After her attack, Shedy once again put distance between her and the stage, all the while spreading arctic mist to impede her opponents.

“Do not panic! Our enemy is but a cornered rabbit. The mist is weak to wind, use magic to block her escape!”

Being the person with relatively more experience fighting Shedy, Salia gave her orders to the adventurers. She sent a gust of air to blast away the cloak of mist around the rabbit girl. Seeing the sight, several adventurers followed suit and used their own wind magic. Outnumbered, Shedy stopped moving.

Then she pointed both her hands toward the direction of the castle center. Her palms joined together in a motion to crush *something*.

crack...

Several magicians took notice of the change. They shouted.

“The barrier?!”

The barrier covering the castle holding the Sapling was much sturdier than the one covering the city. Assaults from outside would have to break it, first. But if someone could enter the castle and break the barrier’s magitool, the protection would disappear.

The castle had spare magitools, so they could recover the barrier in just a few hours. The issue here, however, was that they had no idea *how* the magitool was broken.

The disappearance of the barrier prompted a panic among the people. The girl of white, wielder of powers inconceivable, coolly watched with a demonic smile on her face.

Then she melted into the mist. Everyone, from the adventurers to the royalties, were struck dumb by the sight.

And then, several hours later, news of the destruction of the Sapling of their neighboring country Quarrevings reached them. Once more, she had made fools of them all.

After sniping the barrier magitool at Xontdix’s castle, I jumped on the unstable connection, forcing it to carry me back to the World Tree.

“I actually did it, yessss.”

So many things could have gone wrong back there.

There were hundreds of adventurers and almost a thousand of knights at the castle. Even if each of them only had 300 to 500 combat power at most, that was still enough people to grind down my own 26,000. If I took too long back then and allowed the corporation to interfere, I might have gotten into real trouble.

I had needed the trap-setters to fear me as preparations for my next move. To that end, I had pulled out all the stops.

I had shown the hundreds of adventurers the full power of my magic without reservations, to get them to become wary of *me*.

When I noticed Tiz's group, I had attempted to use **[Causality Alteration]** on those important-looking people. They were there so I might as well take the shot, I thought. It failed when a few others jumped into my aim, but well, that wasn't important.

I was a lot more worried about whether I could destroy the castle's barrier.

In the countries I'd been to, the barrier's magitool was always at the center of the castle, near the Sapling, and so I had aimed my **[Causality Alteration]** at that general direction. If it hadn't been there, or if the magitool's supervisor hadn't been nearby, the skill would have failed. I would have wasted a ton of magic for absolutely no reason.

Then, with the cloud of mist already scattered, I forced a connection to the network. I had had to repeatedly use **[Causality Alteration]** to get the unstable line to work right.

So much mana spent. Thankfully, I was regenerating a lot faster just by staying near the World Tree. I stayed for an hour, getting my magic back up and calming my racing nerves. And then it was time to go back to Quarrevings, where a part of me awaited.

Panda was lazing about in the shadow of the Sapling's branches. As I arrived, he jumped at me, clinging to my waist.

"Hello Panda. I'm here."

"Ook."

I told you, I didn't need bananas.

"...wha-who are you?!"

"A beastman?! Rabbit ears?!"

Shouts rang out. A few researcher-ish humans, who had been harvesting mana near the Sapling, were spooked by my sudden appearance..

"Get her! She's that rabbit in the bounty!"

Thinking their opponent was just a single normal beastman girl, the researchers didn't even call for the guards. They charged at me all by themselves. Really, if they knew I had a bounty, they should have known I was going around destroying Saplings. That I was a "dangerous terrorist".

"I'm gonna be rich-aaaaaAARGH!?"

I blasted icy mist at the five, freezing them in an instant.

Hearing the noises and feeling the chilly air, the guards quickly showed up. I disabled them with **[Causality Alteration]**, turning their old scars into debilitating wounds. I made them watch me grind the Sapling down into dust right in front of their eyes.

"Bye."

Despair pulled all the color out of their faces. I gave them a casual wave, then jumped on the now-available connection to go back to the World Tree.

To the next one.

"Quarrevings's Sapling was destroyed?! The country had fallen?!"

Xontdix's Crown Prince grabbed his messenger by the lapels and *roared*.

Thanks to the geographical closeness of the landmasses, the countries on these three small continents had forged a powerful bond, stronger than any relationship another continent's country could have with their neighbors. Bloodlines frequently crossed beyond borders. Xontdix's princess, Aslan's little sister, had married the Crown Prince of Quarrevings several years ago. She was expecting their first child soon.

"Then what was father... what was the king's decision? We need to send help right away!"

"Y-your Royal Highness... R-reportedly, the culprit was the rumored

rabbit. His Majesty believed the rabbit will come here again, so he had ordered priority to be given to our own country's defense."

"Then what would happen to Quarrevings?! What would happen to my sister?!"

Aslan looked ready to set off with his own army at any moment. He would have, if it hadn't been for Tiz's intervention.

"Aslan, calm down!"

When Shedy showed up within their trap, they had thought her no more than a bagged rat. When she suddenly disappeared, they had thought she was either hiding in the castle or the royal capital. Yet just a few hours later, she had shown up at Quarrevings thousands of kilometers away and destroyed their Sapling.

Their hypothesis was that she possessed an unknown mean of transportation. With her unpredictable appearances, Xontdix's king had made the right decision to focus on the security of their own Sapling.

Even if Quarrevings' Sapling was destroyed, the continent still had Xontdix's own. The climate hadn't changed much.

Quarrevings might have lost their mana source and all the conveniences born from it, but if their royalties still lived and there was no official request for assistance, then the most a foreign country could do was to ask if they needed help or not.

No more.

"Y-Yes... that's right... it's not like Quarrevings' royal family are gone, after all."

"Right. Things would get much worse if this country's Sapling was also destroyed. For the time being, you should send a few people to confirm the situation first."

All the same, Tiz thought there was no way Quarrevings could get back up again after this.

There had been countries attempting to recover after the destruction of their Saplings. But before they could start to deal with the loss of

their markets and utilities, they had to face a far more fundamental problem: how would they eat when all the animals and fish had all left for more abundant lands?

There were talks of going home among Tiz's group, his entourage from Touze Empire. They decided to stay in the end, however.

Even if Xontdix did nothing, there would still be refugees coming in. People who had given up on their country the moment the Sapling was gone.

Monsters that had never appeared near towns and highways before were now attacking settlements and the refugees on the move. The country was forced to send out most of its knights and soldiers, which left the Sapling's defense understaffed.

As soldiers of a country with friendly relations, the smattering of knights from Touze Empire were *volun told* into helping to watch over the Sapling.

Three days later, the situation changed.

The large country Quasix Kingdom, situated on the neighboring continent to the north, had announced their intention to send several thousand soldiers as help in maintaining public order, as well as large quantities of food as aid.

The two continents were separated only by a thin strip of ocean. Ships, merchants' or otherwise, filled the channel.

Travel preparations were already done. By their schedule, the soldiers would cross the ocean and begin peacekeeping one week later.

However, just as Quasix Kingdom's support fleet left port, disaster befell the small country Kancinq to the west of Quasix. Its Sapling was destroyed by Shedy.

Trade coming to and from the Southern Continent had to pass through the doorway that was Kancinq. It was a capital of commerce, a leader of fads and fashions. The country only had a population of 80,000, but its streets were always lively with sailors and merchants.

Of course, Kancinq was aware of the destruction of the Sapling in Quarrevings, as well as that of Rantetrois Principality across the sea. They were on high alert. However, the king had requested ships,

including the merchants', to come to the channel to transport food and other daily goods. A large number of soldiers and adventurers had to accompany them by necessity.

Which left barely two hundred guards to protect the castle's Sapling, including both knights and soldiers. They were powerless against Shedy's night assault. They lost the Sapling in just a few hours.

And so, Quasix Kingdom had requested Chisept Principality in the east to come to Kancinq's aid. But only half a day after the destruction of Kancinq's Sapling, Shedy suddenly appeared inside Chisept's castle and destroyed their Sapling.

I greeted Blobsy, still waiting for me at Chisept's Sapling.

"Hey. Sorry I'm late."

boing

She jumped, snuggling against me. She must have felt a bit lonely. Panda rewarded her with a banana to stuff herself with.

I broke the Sapling, took back the mana package I left behind, put up a token fight with the guards there, then jumped to the newly reborn Sapling.

"You too, sorry to have kept you waiting."

Whenever I visited the reborn Saplings, they were always in the middle of absolutely nowhere. The World Tree must have picked locations humans would find difficult to live in.

As always, I built a small mulch hill to hide the young plant together with Blobsy and Panda. And as always, it sent me a white magic stone.

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Lesser Archdemon Lv. 8]

☐The rabbit demon of Laplace. Trickster and guide of man's fate.

[Magic Points: 33,000/36,200] 10,800↑

[Total Combat Power: 36,600/39,800] 11,900↑

[Unique Skill: <Causality Alteration> <Cyber-Manipulation>
<Absorption> <Materialization>]

[Racial Skill: <Fear> <Mist Form>]

[Simple Identification] [Human Form (Wonderful)] [Subspace Inventory]

After reviving three Saplings, I got to level 8. I got a ton more magic and combat power. By now, I should be able to pick a head-on fight with a developing small country and win.

But that didn't mean I'd be any less careful.

The eastern continent in this group of three, the one with two small countries, would be left alone. I was pretty sure they were turtling up by now. I think I'd just forget about them for a while, actually.

And out of the countries in the two continents I had attacked, the only ones with Saplings left were the large countries Quasix and Xontdix.

Honestly, with how much attention was on me these days, it would be for the better that I ignored them too. But at the same time, I could feel *something* inside of me awakening, urging me to continue.

Well then, let's.

The region around Xontdix was slowly descending into chaos. Just as I planned, the country had feared me. They didn't dare make a move.

Soon, there would be a large wave of refugees pouring into Quasix Kingdom. Furthermore, most of their soldiers and adventurers had been sent to Xontdix's countryside. They didn't have enough manpower.

I used the new Tree connection at Chisept to get to the eastern side of Quasix. After half a day's travel, I approached the capital. The town gate was closed, and the lack of soldiers was evident. I charged right through the gate as mist, shattering it.

"What happened?!"

"Mist?!"

The soldiers were making a fuss. I ignored them and rushed through the city, freezing anyone blocking my way. Once I arrived at the castle, I turned human for an instant, freezing the gate and making use of my high combat power to smash it apart with a palm strike.

The soldiers and the castle's staff members were all struck dumb by the sight.

I twirled around, showing off my red dress and white ears. One of them must have recognized me. Their shout announced my arrival.

“That’s the bunnyyyyyyy!!!”

Knights and soldiers poured out.

I dove straight into the army of hundreds. I killed only the ones in my path, parrying spells on the move if they weren't too dangerous. It took only thirty minutes for my blitzkrieg to carry me from the town gate to the Sapling's destruction.

Next up, Xontdix.

I had a premonition. Somehow, in some way, I would be *transformed* by this next battle.

Chapter 50 A DEMON'S AWAKENING

“Quasix... has fallen?”

The Crown Prince Aslan muttered in a daze upon hearing the news. Tiz next to him was silent, his face grim.

Quarrevings, Kancing, and now Chisept. Small countries they might be, the fact that three Saplings were destroyed in a row was undeniable. Their governments had broken down.

There had been zero casualties among the governors' families and barely any among the citizen population. However, the vast majority of their magitech weapons had been rendered useless, and the large-scale barriers protecting their cities had disappeared. The inevitable monster attacks would soon turn these countries into ruins.

Until now, a country's refugees could rely on the prompt support and protection of their neighboring nation. But what would happen if even

their neighbors lost their home?

On this isolated subgroup of continents, far away from the other landmasses, what few countries there were had forged a deep alliance with each other. But now, the small alliance had further diminished with their members being picked off one by one, and the very isolation that had been their strength was now pushing the survivors into a corner.

And now finally, the Sapling of a large country, Quasix Kingdom, was destroyed.

Part of it was because they had carelessly believed she wouldn't be keeping her assault up for so long. Mainly, however, no one had thought a large country would fall so easily.

The reason was plain to see: Quasix had sent away too much of its soldier in helping the other countries, and the rabbit beastman girl – Shedy – had been far more powerful than anyone could possibly imagine.

The northern and southern landmasses of this subgroup of continents had held five countries. Now, only Xontdix was left standing.

Rumors had it that Quasix's king had immediately given up on his own country when he saw what had happened to his neighbors, and that the royal family had escaped to the Central Continent on their private airship together with their riches.

'Gramps.'

'Understood.'

Tiz looked at his butler. The old servant quietly left, heading toward Touze's airship to give the order to hasten the mana recharging.

They needed to plan for the worst, even if the worst was something that could not be allowed to happen. With that said, they could not openly prepare their escape. Fear had driven this country's nobilities and soldiers into a frenzy. There was a very real chance Touze's entourage would be attacked if they were seen to be getting ready to leave.

"Damn that rabbit! I had always known she was nothing more than a

foul villain ever since I first lay eyes on her. By my hand, the hammer of justice shall strike her down!”

Simple-minded Salia was getting worked up in front of Xontdix’s knights, forgetting about her own position of being the Emperor’s bodyguard. At the same time, she was unwittingly making for a great distraction to keep eyes away from their escape preparations.

Two small countries in the east still survived, but none of them had more than a hundred thousand in population. They did not have the power to help anyone else. They could only help each other to coordinate their defenses and hole up in their castles. They stayed on utmost alert for Shedy, while praying she never appeared.

In these trying times, both the adventurer’s guild and the Temples had spared no expenses in providing support. Airships carrying adventurers of Rank 4 and 5 gathered from all over the world. At Rank 5, an adventurer was practically equivalent to an officer knight.

Since half a year ago, new adventurers with explosive speed of growth were coming out of the woodwork, and a few among them had shown true talent.

But these new adventurers didn’t bring only their talents. They had also brought their own problems.

While not everyone was the same, those to whom the moniker of ‘troublemaker’ would apply were causing no small amount of headaches. Some looked as if they were coming to a festival, even when the country’s very own survival were hinging upon them. Some started fights with the tense soldiers, and in worse cases, even injuring them and getting arrested afterwards.

Ostensibly, the guild was there to provide adventurer support to individuals or small-scale mercenary groups, in order to combat the *monsters* that had started multiplying in recent years. Keeping the peace – for example, patrolling the streets –

in place of the guards was one of their missions. Yet these new adventurers were neglecting their job. They were only there to fight the rabbit beastman girl, all the while making more problems for the knights.

“Still, this is quite the sight...”

There were hundreds of Rank 4 and 5 adventurers in Xontdix’s palace courtyard. They made for a force practically equivalent to the whole of Xontdix’s order of knights.

How would Shedy react if she saw this? If she actually attacked this place, how would she do it?

Tiz had poured a fortune into his bounty to capture her. But with the situation being what it was, he doubted many would think of taking her alive.

Alongside the awareness of being the representative of an allied country was a perverse desire to see her breaking apart this army of adventurers. A peculiarly childish excitement welled up inside him. He felt like he was once again that boy who had just acquired his magic sword for the first time.

It began the next day, in the early morning.

The three small continents had the typical climate of southern countries, only stabilized thanks to the Saplings. But many of the countries on these continents were near the ocean and thus, constantly humid. No one thought the *morning fog* was anything out of the ordinary.

Some of the adventurers were mysteriously and unexpectedly disappearing from time to time. The lack of people on watch had been one of the contributing factors to this disaster.

“What is this chill...?”

“Weird mist, don’t you think?”

“Wait, that’s no mist!”

The several soldiers and adventurers blocking the castle gate turned into frozen statues in an instant, and the ice-covered gate shattered inward. People inside the castle witnessed the rabbit beastman girl marching right through the front door.

“That’s the bunny!!”

Whistles and bells announced her assault. As the knights attempted to

leave their barracks, they found out the drifting mist was more than just a show.

“The doors are all frozen!”

“Break them open! If you can’t, then break the windows!”

Outside, there were 300 soldiers and 100 adventurers. They would need to hold on until the troops from the barracks and castle interior arrived. Against a single normal teenage beastman girl, it would have been considered excessive firepower.

She was *not* normal.

“There she is!”

“The Fluffy Bunny’s here!”

Some of the adventurers rushed forward in the drifting chill, sparing not a single glance for the fearful soldiers.

No one would have thought these men to be high-rank adventurers. They looked far more like clowns prancing around in their inefficiently huge weapons, spiky pauldrons, and overly revealing armor. They leered at Shedy, the girl now midway through her teen standing in front of them. They charged at her, looking more like they were trying to push her down rather than actually fighting.

She turned her cool gaze upon them. She dashed, several times faster than the speed the adventurers’ 1,000 combat power could afford them. Her palm smashed into the face of the man leading the charge.

He gurgled and exploded into glimmering light. The adventurer right behind him jumped toward her. She bent backwards to dodge his wild swing, leg snapping upward to deflect the enormous scythe, then twisting her torso to deliver a roundhouse kick. Her razor-sharp heel pulverized his head.

“Holy sheeeiiiit, that’s OP as fuck!!”

“Front line, surround her!”

“Back line, debuff magic now!”

The latecomers were beginning to work together. They seemed to

have finally realized the threat Shedy posed.

Enfeebling spells clashed against her resistance and lost, disappearing into sparks and ear-grating crackles. She faintly frowned. The girl turned on her side, pointing her right palm at them and squeezed.

“Whoa?!” “What the fuck?!”

The adventurers’ spells failed, disturbing their battle lines. Shedy spread her chilly mist and ran through the gap in their formation, felling the now-sluggish adventurers with flashes of claws and kicks.

Since the fight started, dozens of adventurers had already fallen in just as many seconds. Around eighty percent of the corpses had disappeared, the sight chilling the spines of the soldiers and rooting them to the spot. It was then that the knights finally broke out of their frozen prison.

“Take down the rabbit!”

The officer knight’s shout turned the desperate knights and soldiers into a veritable tsunami of spears and swords.

As Shedy took in their vehemence, their zeal, her countenance turned just a little gentler than what she had shown the adventurers. Frosty mist dripped off of her, sapping heat and magic from everyone in the area, and finally freezing them all.

“What is that...?”

Tiz was watching from the upper floor terrace. He turned to his butler, seeking confirmation once more. The old man only grimly shook his head.

Just as before, they could not **[Identify]** Shedy’s combat power. But they did not need the skill to know that her power was far beyond imagination.

The Rank 5 adventurers with over 1000 combat power were being effortlessly dispatched, and the soldiers and knights with 300 to 500 power might as well be a mob of feeble kobolds facing a Hero.

...a Hero.

Indeed, a Hero might be able to do what Shedy was doing right now.

In this world, there were three persons acknowledged as Heroes by the Holy City Ayune.

The Hero of Might, the **[Warrior]** .

The Hero of Knights, the **[Blademaster]** .

The Heroine of Magic, the **[Sage]** .

Rumors had it that these people, chosen by the elementals of light, had combat power over ten thousand; that they were acting upon a different set of principles than what the Temple at Ayune espoused; and that they were vanquishing evil all around the world.

Tiz had met the Warrior before. He thought the man truly deserved being called a Hero.

The Warrior, the Blademaster, and the Sage were all *humans*. Then what if the other races – the demihumans – had a Hero of their own?

And if such a person existed, then who would be their enemy? Who would be the Villain to the demihumans' Hero?

To humans, Shedy was inarguably Evil.

But then, to the other races, *what was she?*

“...no, that's just stupid.”

Tiz shook his head, getting rid of a notion much too silly for an emperor of a human country to hold.

He liked Shedy. But he didn't covet her so much that he would forget his throne, his empire.

To prevent any further losses, Shedy must be the Evil they must destroy, right here and right now.

But was it even possible? It had been only a few days, yet it seemed like she had had another boost in power. They had hundreds of adventurers, over a thousand knights, and several thousand soldiers. Would it be enough...?

“Gramps, how are the preparations?”

“Going well. However, lady Salia is currently joining His Highness Aslan in combat...”

“...worst case, we leave her.”

If this army could not defeat Shedy here, then Tiz must immediately return to Touze Empire. He gave his order: if needs must, Salia – the bodyguard who had let her personal indignation and enmity pull her away from her post – would be left behind. Then he turned his sight back to Shedy.

Suddenly, pools of liquid *darkness* began to seep out from thin air, coalescing into monstrosities.

“What... are those...?!”

Grotesque spiders of Stygian blackness. Three meters tall. Fifteen meters wide, including their twelve legs.

There were nearly fifty of them.

[MO—07—B] [Military Monster Avatar]

[Magic Points: 1200/1200] [Hit Points: 2000/2000]

[Total Combat Power: 4000]

My conquest of Xontdix’s castle was interrupted by *more* militarized monster avatars.

They looked similar to the crab-spiders I encountered that first time. Their design was seemingly less armored in comparison, instead focusing on mobility judging from their long legs. But higher combat power meant higher defense in the end, anyway. At least that’s what I thought.

They had around 4,000 in combat power. 1,200 magic, too, so they were going to be slinging quite a bit of spells. How did they get so strong? There were even fifty of them. I might have ten times the power of each, but that was enough number to overwhelm me.

Also, I’m surprised they sent so many monster avatars inside a human country’s barrier. There weren’t just humans here, there were tons of players too. What was that corporation thinking?

Oh, crap, all of them just started buzzing. I immediately jumped away. A blast of force exploded not a second later, shattering the frozen statues and turning even uninjured players and soldiers into minced meat, spraying the pristine castle wall with a new coat of paint.

Mute screams from the blood-splattered survivors and the spectators from inside the castle rang out, echoing, coming together to form a low rumble of horror.

I mounted an immediate counterattack, spraying out cold mist, but their response was no less prompt. Several spiders shot out smaller blasts of shockwave to blow away my fog.

Damn them and their training. So annoying.

My unique skill **[Causality Alteration]** was also not very effective against avatars. Sure I could force them to fail their actions just like always, but that was it. They had just been created, after all. Their past barely held any significant events for me to mess with, and Earth was still much too far away for me to actually try to reach all the way over there. Still, there was something I could do.

I created some more mist. The spiders attempted to blast it away once more, and I forced their spells to fail.

My mist touched and froze a few of them, but did no damage other than simply stopping their movements. Looked like they'd taken measures against the cold.

I instantly attempted to follow up and destroy them, but interference came in the form of more explosive bullets from the other spiders. I pretended to dodge the projectiles, swerving ninety-degrees to the side and utilizing my 40,000 combat power to accelerate towards a few of the spiders. My claws tore them apart as I ran.

...and even all that only netted me two kills.

They weren't impossible to put down, but I had to expend too much mana in comparison.

This couldn't continue. I couldn't stay like this.

To pick a fight with two worlds and survive, I needed more than just power. I needed to *change*.

Just a little more... just *one more*, and my transformation would be complete.

“Deputy Director, what in the world are you thinking?!”

The secretary slammed open the door. Inside the room, Brian was setting up his personal VR device. He turned to look at her, a beaming grin in his face.

“Heeey, Audrey, what’s up?”

The individual thought to be No. 13, the girl who had attacked the facility on Earth, had begun destroying the corporation’s sources of mana over in Yggdrasia. Security and surveillance was more stringent than ever, and the top brass was demanding the white girl be captured as soon as possible.

And so Brian had requested more budget for his special plan, which was an operation to capture the girl by utilizing the players, as a surveillance network, and the guild. But just as soon as it began, every single one of the new militarized monster avatar models were deployed. The operation did *not* call for this.

“Why did you deploy the new models in front of the public?! And what was with that amount of magic and power?! That was far beyond the allowed value!”

“You’re asking me why...? Isn’t it obvious? I’m killing the bunny.”

“What...”

Seeing Brian’s twisted smile, Audrey clenched her teeth.

With the current technology, 800 was the limit for the militarized avatars’ starting magic power. Any further and the link between the user and the avatar would degrade, causing unpredictable behaviors on the avatar side and increasing the mental burden on the user side. Originally, the militarized models were supposed to be gradually building up their magic in a process similar to ‘leveling’. The corporation would then move to analysis for several years before

beginning development of high-leveled monster avatars.

Pushing the starting magic all the way up to 1200 must have been Brian's own *unsanctioned* idea.

Ever since the white girl had taken his leg, Brian had been displaying more and more instabilities with every single passing day, and now, he was even ignoring his orders. Vengeance was the only thing on his mind.

"Come on, little bunny..." Brian chuckled darkly, "let me hear you scream..."

Despite the large-scale monster-repelling barrier, dozens of black spiders had suddenly appeared and began attacking people.

At first, many had thought the monsters were minions of Shedy's, the mysterious rabbit beastman girl possessing an unknown mean of transport. Contrary to their expectations, however, the girl was no exception to the black spiders'

assault. Battle was joined between the two.

"Infighting?!"

"Regroup! Regroup while they're still busy! Bring the magicannons, now!"

Those who had recovered from the chaos were beginning preparations for a counterattack.

The magicannon was an enlarged version of the guns that used magic to shoot out lead bullets. Due to the mana consumption, the cannons required a supply line directly from the Sapling in order to shoot. They had enough power to shoot down a flying dragon from several kilometers away.

As they expected Shedy to fight their soldiers and adventurers in a melee, their original plan did not call for the cannon.

But now that she was busy with the spiders, there was no more reason

to hesitate.

Three cannons were set up on top of the castle wall to point inward. With a roar of thunder, the whole courtyard was blown away, ground and all.

“Got you!”

“Serves you right, damn rabbit!”

“Fucking rabid demihuman, that’s what you get for biting your masters!”

Between the spiders and Shedy, who was more dangerous here? To humankind, the girl destroying Saplings was Evil, that much was true, yet it was not what had guided their aim in truth. No, it was simply the hatred they felt for the *cattle* that dared to rise up against humankind.

However, their decision had led to a tragedy. The cannon shots had damaged the black spiders, making them lose track of the girl that had been their objective. Abnormalities began to show in the monsters’ actions, and they started attacking humans with no discrimination.

“AaaaaaAAaRGhh!!”

“Exterminate those spiders!”

“Fuck, they’re toug-aaAAAAAAGH!!!”

The spiders clung to the castle wall, attacking the nobles standing behind windows or on terraces. Several black shadows descended upon the cannons, massacring the adventurers and soldiers nearby. In his desperation, the last soldier managed to fire a single cannon shot moments before his death. The projectile punched a hole through the castle wall. The spiders began pouring inside through the new opening.

“Your Majesty, please evacuate!”

Led by his knights, Tiz left the terrace. No matter how confident of his skills he was, Tiz could not stand up to the spiders and their 4000 combat power.

Still, he did not think Shedy would be so easily brought down. He looked back for a moment. In what remained of the courtyard, he saw a mass of white mist bursting out from the cloud of dust. It streamed through the hole in the castle wall as if it had a will of its own.

Something is about to happen, Tiz thought, and I'm not going to miss it.

"I'm going down! Follow me!"

"The secret beta testers are showing signs of mental collapses! The experiment can't go on!"

The staff members monitoring the secret beta testers shouted, panic coloring their voices. Audrey hurried to give her order.

"I authorize the cessation of-"

"Oh no no no, Audrey, can't have that now."

The muzzle of a handgun was touching the back of her head, she realized. Audrey gasped.

"W-Why..."

"Oh, you sure asked some silly questions." Brian laughed. "Anyway. By my order, freeze Audrey's authority for today."

With Brian's voice, the green lights on Audrey's mobile device all turned red.

The secret beta testers were showing signs of mental collapses much too quickly. Yet despite that, Brian seemed intent on driving them to their limits in order to kill No. 13.

Audrey stood, aghast. Brian took a look at her, nodded in satisfaction, then booted up his personal full-dive VR system.

"You just stay there and watch. I'm going to kill that little bunny myself."

Inside, the castle was a mess.

I managed to turn into mist right before that surprise bombardment hit me. Once I flew into the castle, I returned to human form.

The militarized avatars had suddenly gone on a rampage. They weren't moving mechanically like they did before; they were acting like a swarm of actual locusts, attacking anything alive and devouring humans left and right. Messy eaters, too.

Metallic screeches reached my ears.

Some of them had found me, and they promptly attacked. Their combat power hadn't changed, but their movements had gotten much smoother, displaying a kind of animalistic nimbleness.

I immediately froze one of them, gouging out its head with my claws.

They might have gotten individually stronger, but they'd lost their cooperation in exchange. One on one, they posed no threat to me. Well, the humans being attacked probably wouldn't think so, but it wasn't like I had any obligation to save them anyway.

At any rate, I needed to deal with this group. Just as I finished off the last of them, I noticed a few humans approaching me from behind.

"Shedy!"

"...Tiz."

He was still here? I thought he'd skipped town already.

Well, it wasn't like I cared what happened to him anyway. I made to return to my search for the Sapling, when Tiz called out to me again.

"Are you so set on killing humans that you would even recruit monsters to do your bidding, Shedy?!"

It was his tone of voice, not what he said, that made me stop. I quietly turned around.

"...no. The spiders are enemies. I've nothing to do with them."

"Then-"

"But," I looked into his eyes and declared, "destroying the Saplings is

my wish. Humans are just reaping what they sowed.” *If you must hate, then hate me. That’s the only thing I can do for you. For humankind.*

Tiz heard what I left unsaid. He scowled. After a few moments of thought, he raised his hand toward a direction.

“...Xontdix’s Sapling is over there. The path’s tricky, so go through the walls if you’re in a hurry,” he said, his words bordering on treason.

“Boy!” The old butler raised his voice in rebuke. The young emperor paid no heed to him and continued.

“I’m taking Xontdix’s royalty family to escape. I won’t stand in your way, but do something about those spiders until we can get out of here.”

“...understood.” I quietly nodded.

I didn’t care all that much, but if people I knew were to die, I’d prefer they at least do so away from my sight.

We shared one final glance, then turned away from each other and ran.

I took his advice and simply went through the walls. Several minutes later, I arrived at the Sapling.

I was greeted with a cackling laugh.

“Did you think you could save them?! Too bad for you, rabbit!”

Salia, the supposed bodyguard of Tiz, was standing there together with the knights of this country.

Below her feet lay dozens of beastmen and elven corpses, all cut into ribbons and charred black.

“How’s the taste of despair?! That’s what you get for getting in my way and making me look like a fool... t-the hell is that look for?! Brazen vermin!”

Salia had killed the demihuman slaves of this castle. Apparently, her grudge had convinced her I was trying to rescue them.

I supposed it wasn't surprising people would think so. I *had* saved demihumans, even if it was all on a whim of mine.

"Out of my way."

I clenched my right hand. The knights, including Salia, instantly had their arms and legs broken. They collapsed into pools of blood, howling cries of agony.

I leisurely walked through them. Salia still struggled. She reached a hand toward me, eyes full of hatred. I froze only the surface of her face.

The woman renewed her screams and scrabbled at her iced-over skin. It only made things worse. Oh well, I'd be spending some time with her later on anyway.

"...sorry I made you wait."

I whispered. Xontdix's Sapling scattered into light, and I grabbed hold of the white magic stone inside.

"Where, oh where are you, little bunny..."

While the dozens of spiders were ravaging the castle interior, an enormous monster appeared outside. A bluish-black centipede twenty meters long and one meter in diameter went through the castle wall, crushing the fortifications with claws and the sheer weight of its armored body. Whoever could use **[Identification]** despaired, when the skill revealed its combat power to be over seven thousand.

At that moment, the barrier protecting the castle disappeared, announcing to the world the destruction of the Sapling. All hope was gone for the humans.

From inside the ruined castle, the source of the calamity quietly walked out. The white rabbit showed herself.

“There you are!!”

The giant centipede attacked as soon as it caught sight of Shedy. The knights ran towards her in a last-ditch attempt of revenge.

“Gah-”

And as she raised her right hand, everything stopped moving.

Her cold, impassive eyes swept through the men and monster standing stock-still as if frozen in time. Her hand clenched into a fist, and corpses of knights fell down in bloody showers.

Brian, sitting in his VR device, was forcibly logged out when both his eyes and arms were suddenly pulverized.

And Shedy began her silent transformation.

Pale skin, yet still faintly pink of flesh and blood, was now being bleached of all color, turning alabaster white. Scarlet pupils bled out to stain the white of her eyes crimson-red.

An enormous cloud of fog billowed, exploding to cover the whole capital city in a blink of an eye. All living creatures —

including the human population of one hundred and fifty thousand — were turned into ice sculptures.

Tiz looked back from the airship that had just barely cleared the blast zone. He saw Shedy standing in the center of a wasteland of frost, of deathly silence, as though the ice had entombed even the resentment of the deceased. He thought her cold gaze was pointed at him. He forgot to breath for a moment.

And so, Shedy had shown herself to be the worst Evil of this world. People started calling the sorcerous rabbit something else.

Whitehare, the Dark Lady.

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Archdemon Lv. 10]

☐The rabbit demon of Laplace. Trickster and guide of man’s fate.

[Magic Points: 56,000/56,000] 19,800↑

[Total Combat Power: 61,600/61,600] 21,800↑

**[Unique Skill: < Causality Alteration > < Cyber-Manipulation >
< Absorption > < Materialization >]**

[Racial Skill: < Fear > < Mist Form >]

[Simple Identification] [Human Form (Wonderful)] [Subspace Inventory]

[Dark Lady]

Chapter 52 END OF THE BATTLE

The Deputy Director of the 7th research center, Brian, had ignored the corporation's orders and went ahead with his own recklessness. The militarized monster avatars driven by soldiers — the secret beta testers — had been overcharged far beyond the allowed values, and nearly all of them had been deployed into the fight at Yggdrasia.

And at that battle, they had been wiped out by a large-scale frost attack. The majority of the soldiers had begun to display signs of mental instability. They had to be hospitalized in an isolation ward affiliated to the facility.

And the man behind it all, Brian. Possibly as a reaction to improper use of a VR device, his old wounds had abruptly worsened, leading to the loss of both his eyes and arms. Combined with the delirium he showed, Brian had been transferred to a specialized isolation ward.

“Well then, do your best, Audrey.”

She sighed.

With Brian now hospitalized, his secretary and chief researcher, Audrey, had been appointed the interim Deputy Director.

Despite her youth, being only in her late twenties, she was chosen thanks to her familiarity to the current experiment and workplace. But more importantly, she was chosen after most of the other candidates had run away with tails between their legs when they learned of Brian's fate.

The Director, an old man who had gained his station through politics, showed up at the research center after about half a year's absence, looking like he was about to go golfing afterwards. And after handing the metaphorical keys of the facility to Audrey, he immediately made himself scarce.

As the 7th research center's acting Deputy Director, Audrey was practically the boss now. All the same, things weren't looking optimistic.

The World Tree's Saplings, precious mana sources for the corporation, were being destroyed. Attempts to stop the culprit didn't so much fail

as *blew up* on their faces. If things didn't change, the 7th research center's mana avatar development project would soon find itself in trouble.

"...no other choice, I suppose."

Audrey made the decision to offload a part of the work to another department, even if the researcher inside her was railing against the prospect.

More specifically, the 7th research center would now only be working on the development of militarized monster avatars.

The magical weapon project, which had been expanded thanks to Brian's savviness, and the capture of the rabbit beastman girl responsible for it all would now be inherited by the 4th research center, the original owners of the magical weapons project before it was transferred to the 7th.

"Hah! Brian snatched the project out of our hands, and now look at what happened! That world had dragons with over ten thousand combat power. You people should have expected the same sort of opposition. Well, it's back in professional hands now. Just watch us," a plump man said, sneering.

Audrey had turned the magical weapon project data over to the Deputy Director of the 4th research center. He heaped snide remarks and sarcastic complaints at her all the while, but considering it was all true, there was nothing she could say in response.

But she had something else more important to worry about. She *needed* to foist the job of capturing the rabbit to some other research center, no matter what else she must give up.

The 7th research center had had their data ransacked by the 4th, yet the staff members had stayed strangely quiet about it.

All of them, including Audrey, had once been the target of the White Rabbit Girl's displeasure. And none of them wanted to be her enemy.

The VR chat boards of *World of Yggdrasia* was aflame with talks of the event quest the other day — the so-called Operation: Capture the Bunny.

“I came! I joined! I died in one hit!”

“Goddamn was she overpowered!”

“I’m a Rank 5 tank, but my head exploded from a single palm strike. Why?”

“Lolol you’re that guy right at the beginning?! Go tank with your shield if you’re a tank, dumbass.”

“Man, the whole place got filled with mosaics. The Bunny’s way too brutal!”

“What about those crapton of spiders? They weren’t the Dark Bunny Lady’s minions, right?”

“Pretty sure they opposed her, considering they fought her and all. I’m not sure on the details, but I’ve heard there were fifty monsters with four thousand combat power that were as powerful as draconic-class monsters, like wyverns, maybe.

Were we supposed to take the Bunny’s side back then?”

“Nah, I mean, if we consider the whole thing to be a story quest, then it’s probably the part of the story when the Bunny becomes the Dark Lady, right?”

“Which means that last part where she blew up a whole city happened because the devs wanted to emphasize to the players that the Dark Lady’s evil, right? And to introduce her as the final boss.”

“Then the devs failed epically. It just made her more popular!”

“AAAA FUCKING HELL I KNEW IT! Should have borrowed my parents’ money for the figurine, fuck!”

“Behold my collection. I got both the grown-up and the kiddie versions right here!”

“Go find an auction, dude. The resalers are selling them for ten times the price.”

“So the Bunny’s getting way stronger with every single event quest. Has anyone analyzed her power?”

“Her combat power’s not identifiable, just like always, but judging from the fights she had with the spiders, she should have twenty thousand at the very least.”

“That’s the Dark Bunny Lady for you. And then she awakened as a Dark Lady right after that, so it’s possible she’d gotten even stronger now.”

“How the hell do we win? I got two combat skills at level 5 now, yet my total combat power only just broke 1000.”

“Well, she’s the final boss, I guess we’ll have to get to Rank 10 first? The game just updated to allow for skill level 6, right?”

“Unlike the other games, there’s actually just one Dark Lord in this one. I wouldn’t want her to be easily defeated.”

“Even if she can be defeated, that just makes things unfair for whoever’s late to the boss fight.”

“Yeah, that’s exactly why she’s so strong. My guess is that it’s going to be a raid with a few thousand people.”

“Hot damn, I’m not even sure my battlestation can handle that amount.”

“It’s not the combat power’s that scary, it’s her batshit insane special abilities. I can’t imagine how we can win.”

“The super cold mist is annoying, but not impossible to deal with. We know it’s weak to wind spells, so just be careful and we won’t get OHKO. Probably.”

“That thing where she points her hand at you? What the fuck is that? My spells just fizzled out.”

“There’s been a lot of talk about that. The conclusion’s that it’s probably some sort of probability manipulation.”

“Does it means both spells and combat arts can fail?! How the fuck do we win against that?!”

“R-rank 10... maybe... hopefully...”

“Excuse me, how do I join the Dark Army?”

“Phew...”

I returned to the World Tree on the connection I’ve unlocked. I could finally relax.

My body hadn’t changed a fraction. But I felt like something inside of me, something critical, had been swapped.

I knew, somehow, that the Human inside me — the one in charge of all my thinking — were gone, and some *thing* else had taken her place. What happened back then... perhaps it was the moment I became a true Demon.

And my appearance that time might have been a reflection of that. I’d been worried for a while that it’d ruin any later attempts to infiltrate human settlements, but once I’d calmed down, my bleached skin and

bloodied eyes returned to normal. I wondered if that was my Demonic look...

Before, I'd been restraining myself, trying to keep from any unnecessary killing, since my opponents were Humans. Now, however, the distinction was no longer there. I no longer had any reason to hesitate.

Of course, that wasn't to say I'd lost all hesitation when it comes to killing human children. I'd play with puppies and kittens, but if a pack of wild dogs attacked me I'd wipe them out, lair and all. It's the same thing to me.

In other words, I now saw Humans as no different from packs of animal or lairs of goblins. That was all that's changed.

If someone was friendly to me, I'd extend my hand to them even if they were kobolds. If someone stood in my way, I'd exterminate them like I would a nest of wasps, even if they were humans.

That didn't mean I'd poke the beehive for honey, however. Not worth it.

By which I meant normal humans weren't worth much.

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Archdemon Lv. 10]

☐The rabbit demon of Laplace. Trickster and guide of man's fate.

[Magic Points: 56,000/56,000]

[Total Combat Power: 61,600/61,600]

[Unique Skill: <Causality Alteration> <Cyber-Manipulation>
<Absorption> <Materialization>]

[Racial Skill: <Fear> <Mist Form>]

[Simple Identification] [Human Form (Wonderful)] [Subspace Inventory]

[Dark Lady]

My magic went up by around twenty thousand, but considering I destroyed a whole city, that wasn't much of an increase.

The place should've had at least a hundred thousand people living there. With how much I'd gained, that meant each person didn't even give me a point of magic.

I still remembered that time my rank increased when I was a low demon, and how the experience I gained from the caterpillars were lessened. I supposed it was no surprise I wouldn't gain much from powerless humans.

I should go for the strong ones. The stronger, the better. And horrifically sinful too, if possible. The more evil they were, the *tastier* they smelled.

Once I became a true demon, my rank finally turned into Archdemon. Got to level 10, too. What was the level cap, I wondered? If I gained as many as the Saplings I revived, would the cap be 100? Wow, it's going to take a while.

But I was curious about something else. This strange title that I'd gotten.

[Dark Lady] ... what was this?

How curious. I identified it. Some text showed up to the side of the title.

[Dark Lady]

☐ One recognized as 'Evil', or as a threat, by the vast majority of a world's sentient life.

☐ Some beings are called 'Dark Generals' due to their threat level.

...so to summarize, I supposed that was how the human race here saw me after I destroyed a whole city?

And I thought I was a Dark Lady due to my demonic heritage, but it looked like there wasn't really a relation. I could've been called 'God of Destruction' or 'Evil Overlord' and it would have been much the same.

Finally, apparently Dark Generals were a thing. Huh.

boing

“Ook.”

As I sat down on the World Tree’s roots for a quick breather, Blobsy clambered up to my shoulder, while Panda jumped on my lap and gave me a banana.

Thanks. But you still haven’t told me where that banana came from.

Ah well, whatever. Let’s get to the next Sapling after the break. Pretty sure the humans wouldn’t be so careless this time, but that was exactly what I wanted. More strong people for me.

I think there was a ‘Hero’ somewhere in this world, right?

The Saplings of five countries on the small continental group in the southern hemisphere had been destroyed in barely any time at all. What’s more, two of them were large countries. The whole world was struck dumb.

The final battle at Xontdix, and the 150,000 citizen casualty of its capital, was a wake-up call for everyone. Royalties of the remaining 30 large countries came together in a conference call. They officially designated the culprit behind it all —

the rabbit beastman girl — to be an existential threat: the Dark Lady. They pledged to work together to defeat this enemy.

At the same time, the three Heroes of this world had also received a request to subdue the Dark Lady Whitehare, coming from the Holy City Ayune and the Temples themselves.

Chapter 53 A NEW POWER

“The Dark Lady is attacking!!”

News from Quanneuf, the neighboring country, arrived through the magitech telecommunication system. The governor of Quantluit jumped to his feet, eyes wide, his glass of rum — a luxury, now that the world’s commerce was grinding to a halt — clattering on the floor.

“Impossible... why?! What grudge does she have for this region?!”

Just the other day, the five countries that were their friends and neighbors had collapsed, one after another. It hadn’t been even a week.

It had been a wake-up call for the whole world. Large countries worldwide had held a meeting, and they had declared the rabbit beastman behind it all to be the Dark Lady.

The last time an official Dark Lord Declaration happened was centuries ago, when half of today’s countries hadn’t even existed. At the time, the demihuman races, including the Elves and the Dwarves, had come together to defeat what had

been considered a Calamitous threat, the Vile Dragon. But in most of the human countries, the story went that the credit belonged solely to the humans.

Back then, there had been two Heroes. They had left the Central Continent to start their own countries in the Western Continent and the Eastern Continent, bringing the whole world into the grasp of humans.

And today, there were three Heroes.

The vast majority of humans believed they would win against any Dark Lord or Lady, as long as they had Heroes. They might be fearful, but they held not a hint of pessimism.

The human countries had begun preparations for war against the Dark Lady. Among the countries of the small continental group Shedy

attacked, only Quanneuf and Quantluit had been spared, by virtue of holing up inside their borders. They were aggressively hiring adventurers to add to their soldiers and militia as part of their defensive measures.

But while large countries might have the ability to keep up their guard for long periods of time, the small countries certainly did not. Forming the militia meant lost production, and hiring high-rank adventurers costed several times the pay of a normal soldier.

So the only thing the small countries could do was to rely on the *Dark Lady Prediction* report that the Temples had sent to every single country's ministry of foreign affairs. According to the report, the next Dark Lady attack was most likely to happen in either the eastern region of the Central Continent, or the western region of the Northern Continent.

The report calculated a 40% probability even for those most likely regions. This small group of continents, a region just recently attacked, only had less than a 10% chance of another assault, and so the governor couldn't afford for the country to stay in their shell forever. The militia had to be disbanded, and citizens returned to their usual lives.

But now, the Dark Lady was attacking the neighboring country of Quanneuf. This wasn't right. They were supposed to be a low-probability region.

"Your Majesty, please give the order! We must save Quanneuf!" An army general shouted, impatient to set off.

The governor blanched. "W-wait, no, we don't have enough soldiers! Scout out the situation first!"

"Your Majesty..."

The nobility of the two surviving countries of the region had relatives living in both, so there was no lack of sympathy for the general. But even if the army set off right away, just the preparations alone would take up two days, plus another two at the very least if they took the magitech train. It was very unlikely Quanneuf could hold on by then.

The officers of both countries were keeping in contact by the magitech telecommunication system, and what they understood about the

situation could be summarized as follows: Quanneuf had changed their monster-repelling barrier into the more mana-intensive magic-repelling barrier, as the target of their caution was a beastman. And so, the Dark Lady hadn't been able to infiltrate the capital as easily as she used to do.

So she covered the whole capital in arctic mist instead.

Like Quantluit, Quanneuf had disbanded their militia. They lacked the soldiers for a counteroffensive. The citizens had their hands full just trying to survive the blizzard, and even their plumbing had frozen over. They needed immediate support.

“Would we be in time...?”

“In time or not, what about the humanitarian aid...”

“But what if even our country falls...”

“Oh, you won't need to worry about that.”

A voice cut through the clamoring nobles. It was a maid with chestnut-colored hair and eyes. Plain colors, but cute-looking.

She looked in her early teens. Was she a noble's apprentice maid?

No one knew how long she'd been here. The sudden interruption to the meeting prompted the general to stand up, his face set in a frown of irritation.

“The adults are talking here, little girl! Guards, throw her out!”

Several soldiers approached her. But the moment they grabbed the maid's arm, they stood stock-still, as if frozen.

No. They were actually frozen. The soldiers turned white in a blink of an eye. The warmth of spring suddenly turned into the freezing cold of arctic winter, and right in front of the crowd's shivering eyes, the girl's hair and maid uniform melted into a small little slime, revealing scarlet hair and a crimson dress. The very embodiment of their fear.

“...the Dark Lady...?”

The governor's whisper of despair echoed in the silent room. A blizzard of glacial mist ravaged the castle, and the inhabitants did not even realize they had already drawn their last warm breath.

“—My Lady, were you successful?—”

In a room now devoid of living people, a voice rang out from the magitech communication device. I gave it a glance.

“Thanks for the help. But I don't plan on being your ruler.”

“—of course, we understand. We simply do not want to repeat our mistake, that is all.—”

The voice cut out. Panda stopped working the communication device and joined my former disguise, Blobsy, in returning to their usual places on my waist and shoulder.

“Good job.”

boing

“Ook.”

Ever since I got declared a Dark Lady, the humans had raised their security up a notch. I couldn't just stroll into their countries like I used to.

My original plan, if I could call it one, was to freeze them all from outside, forcing them to choose between dying out or waiting for rescue. Just as I got ready to begin, however, some people contacted me.

Well, it was less them contacting me and more Panda finding them when they were on their desperate search, really.

They were demihumans. A group of beastmen and elves who hadn't been captured by the humans, or had managed to escape. I had snuck into the city with their help, got into the castle with everyone none the wiser thanks to my disguise, dealt with the witnesses, then

destroyed Quanthuit's Sapling.

Quanneuf's Sapling was already gone, of course. The people talking to Quanthuit just a while ago were elves, using their own magic to work the magitech communication devices.

The middle-aged elven leader of the group had said it was a "mistake".

Elves were long-living. Perhaps this leader person even knew of the time when their race still considered humans to be their brothers and sisters.

This mistake... would be them allowing the humans to parasite on the Saplings, right?

...well, whatever. If some other people decided to follow the humans' footsteps, I just needed to crush them once more.

The demihumans' help was helpful, for sure, but much more useful was the effect of my Disguise.

No, I didn't get any skill to change my looks. The ones with new skills were my kins.

[Blobsy] [Race: Jelly Slime] [Kin of Shedy, the Demon]

[Magic Points: 10/10] [Hit Points: 10/10]

[Total Combat Power: 10]

[Special Skill: Laundry - Cleaning - Fashion]

[Panda] [Race: Monochrome Monkey] [Kin of Shedy, the Demon]

[Magic Points: 20/20] [Hit Points: 20/20]

[Total Combat Power: 20]

[Special Skill: Makeup Artist - Banana]

Where did I even start.

Blobsy got a new skill called **[Fashion]**. Apparently it was what she used to stretch herself around me and mimic clothes.

...so I don't really care, but this probably came about because Blobsy cared more about the clothes I wore than myself.

She's more feminine than I was.

The amazing thing about her skill was that it could even hide the rabbit ears on my head. Even so, it couldn't change my face, nor could it change my eye color. If anyone looked, they might realize who I was. And here was where Panda's skill came in.

[Makeup Artist] ... huh, why the name? Anyway, Panda's skill had changed my eye color and my looks a little bit. The rest, Blobsy's mimicry could cover up and make to look more natural.

Amazing. The two of them were amazing. They covered for so much of my weaknesses. They were so impressive I forgot myself and petted them for a whole hour.

Also, if I let those two picked my next target instead of doing it myself, I almost never got ambushed.

There were some players this time around, but not many. Rather than their numbers, however, I was more curious about how they seemed to be a lot less willing to fight me ever since last time.

Did they realize the difference in power? Those I met didn't even pull out their weapons, they just smiled and took a commemorative picture. And when I killed them, they just cheered, looking absolutely radiant, before disappearing into dust.

Were those *true* gamers...? Such unfathomable creatures.

"Where next?"

I asked my kins with a map of the world spread out before us. Surprisingly, they looked indecisive.

Was *everywhere* difficult now?

"Then tell me where it would be *interesting*."

I had access to a disguise now, anyway. Maybe I could go scout things out and sightsee at the same time.

They pointed right at the center of the eastern continent.

The Torrann Caliphate... looked like a troublesome one, judging from its name.

And there... I met a certain somebody.

Chapter 54 THE WARRIOR

Torrann Caliphate was a large country right in the middle of the Central Eastern continent.

It was a relatively new country, with not even a hundred years of history under its belt. Its caliph claimed to be a descendant of a Hero centuries ago, and the country revered Heroes as its religion... well, at least that was what the guidebook said.

Apparently, that first caliph of their line just showed up out of nowhere and said so, so who knew if it was true or not.

Although supposedly, one of the actual Heroes of the current generation had been born in this country.

“A Hero, huh...”

I had to wonder if they really existed. Rumors had it they were stronger than a dragon, but as a human-turned-monster, I really couldn't believe someone could be that powerful while still staying human.

“Oook.”

“Alright then, teacher, let's begin.”

And this was where Panda, the monochrome monkey, came in with his knowledge of this world. He began his history lesson with a textbook we pilfered from the castle of ex-Quasix.

Generally, the strength of a lifeform on this world depended on the total amount of mana they possessed. Excluding spiritual lifeforms like me, as long as they were flesh and blood, the amount of energy they could contain would depend on their physical size, just like normal animals.

And dragons were *monsters* among monsters. They were big, tough, and due to the elemental power residing inside their bodies, they were especially magical, which made them *powerful*.

Then that meant spiritual lifeforms unrestricted by the physical form like me would be the strongest, right? Not quite. For example,

elementals couldn't exist in locations lacking their constituent element, and demons required a 'reason' for being, like 'contracts'.

But well, apparently demons living for a few millennia knew quite a few loopholes like acquiring different attributes, so they didn't have a problem there. And I got a Contract with the World Tree anyway.

"That's quite the clever pet. That's a monochrome monkey, right?" The peddler next to me said, sighing in admiration.

"Yeah."

The man was bored, so he had joined in Panda's lesson (which was really just the monkey opening the book and pointing at pages).

We were lining up for border control in order to get inside Torrann Caliphate.

One reason why I came here was, of course, due to Blobsy and Panda's suggestion, but another reason was that I wanted to see what sort of defensive measures a large country was taking. I'd been blowing up Saplings quite *spectacularly*, after all.

That, and I wanted to actually do some serious intel gathering. The situation's changed quite a bit. I couldn't afford to keep relying on just the guidebook.

"With their intelligence, monochrome monkeys are really popular as pets, you know? Young lady, would you care to part with him? I can pay you ten small golds."

"Don't wanna." I shot him down.

Apparently Panda's fellow monkeys were quite popular, but their native habitat was the Southern Continent and the Southwestern Continent. I'd heard that ever since I went on my enthusiastic walks in that direction, it had gotten a lot more difficult for the humans to find any monochrome monkeys available for sale.

And that was just Panda. Blobsy was a lot rarer. I wondered if she would be targeted.

"I see, what a pity. Well then, it's nearly your turn."

"Yeah."

The man seemed disappointed, but readily relented. I walked forward to the border control guards.

From my experience, newcomers to a city in the countryside generally didn't have to deal with very strict immigration, comparing to a capital city.

The magitech trains handled some of the shipping, but for the medium-and-small scale merchant companies who dealt in goods for commoners, many still preferred magitech carriages over trains due to their lower fees.

Besides the merchants, the rural cities also saw heavy traffic from adventurers who were hunting nearby. This was why the lackluster security of rural cities, wherein the gate guards didn't bother with anything more than just a peek at an identity card, was considered something desirable, rather than a flaw. Yet just as I feared, even towns in the boondocks were beginning to seriously look over my card.

"...alright, go ahead."

Not like they were using magic or anything more meticulous, though. Thanks to Blobsy's 'Fashion', I now looked like a chestnut-haired human girl. I showed them my adventurer's card, and they let me in just like that.

Not the card Tiz had made for me back then, obviously. That would just be asking for trouble. The resistance's demihumans had helped me make another one in an adventurer's guild empty of any humans.

"Well then, miss adventurer, may we meet again."

The middle-aged peddler, the man who had helped me kill some time with his talks, said his goodbyes and left.

Even after I took off my hood, both he and the gate guards displayed no suspicions. My disguise was holding. At this rate, maybe I could even enter the guild.

Ever since I came to this world, I hadn't had a single moment to relax. Might as well have a tour around the town, then.

This Torrann Caliphate — or rather, the whole Eastern Continent —

looked like Earth's Middle East. According to a new book I bought, *Lonely Yggdrasia*, which was a series of guidebooks about each of the continents, the reason this country had developed so much despite existing for only around a century was due to their access to a kind of black oil coming from underground, entirely different from animal fats or vegetable oils. The common name for it was "Burning Water".

Processing it with mana resulted in a material that was both light and strong, and this was the source of their wealth.

...that's plastic, right?

And so, due to what I guessed was an overindulgence in mana consumption, over the course of a century, their forests were being replaced by deserts. This led to plastic replacing wood as the main material for their products, and it all turned into a never-ending spiral of desertification, which had led to the current climate.

The guidebook just waved it off as a "strange" and "troubling development", but really, I gave it a few more centuries before the whole place became an actual desert.

With how things were, the country was relying on food imports from other continents. Looked like their plastic products were fetching a good price thanks to the lightness and durability, but to search for and to dig up the raw materials that was the Burning Water, they were using up a vast amount of mana. Once the Sapling disappeared from this land, the country would collapse in no time.

Well, my goal was "the destruction and rebirth of Saplings", not "human genocide", so honestly it was all the same for me.

"Still..."

Looking around town, I'd had thoughts such as '*this looks nice*', or '*that building's cool*', but that was all. I surprised myself with my own lack of emotions.

I never had any memories of going out with my family. The world I'd known was just a bubble: a closet and a balcony at first, and then after I moved to the orphanage, a room packed with bunk beds, and the facility for the experiment. I first thought that perhaps my lack of interest was because I had only ever known the outside world through library books, but after some time walking around town, the answer came to me unbidden.

I felt cold when I touched ice and felt hot when I neared flames. Obvious, perhaps, but what's different about me was that fire couldn't burn me, nor could the cold freeze me.

Outside, the townspeople had to cover themselves with fabric to prevent sunburn, while inside, the heat forced them to dress lightly. Yet to me, they felt like characters on a screen. *'Must be tough'*, I thought blandly, and that was the most sympathy I could dredge up for them.

At first, I thought it made me similar to those players who hadn't realized this world was real, but then I realized the main reason for my attitude: I had become something different from humans, something *more*. I was a High-ranked Demon.

And now that I had become a true demon, what I considered to be 'happiness' was no longer the same as a human's.

When I was human, I wanted food when I was hungry, I wanted a bed that wasn't cold, and I wanted my wounds to heal faster. I wanted a lot of things.

But now, my desires had gone... and with them, *a few other things*.

As I walked around, idle contemplations in my mind, Panda on my shoulder told me we were being tailed by some strange people.

Both I and Blobsy had realized their gazes and their presence, but the annoying part was that we couldn't know whether it was simple interest, or actual malice.

Before, I would have hidden myself somehow. This time, though, my curiosity led me toward an alley to lure them in. I wondered if 'fear' was one of those things I'd lost together with my humanity.

Out of the presence nearby, one of them had quite a bit of *power*. I was interested.

"Hey there, little lady, don't you know it's dangerous around here?"

A short while after I entered the alley, the three men tailing me approached. One of them spoke a line so trite it wouldn't have been out of place in a museum.

"What do you mean, misters?" I replied.

“Oh, just a bit of a warning. That’s a monochrome monkey there, right? It’s quite a rare thing around here, surprisingly.

You should know bringing it along out in the open like that’s gonna attract some... unsavory people. But don’t worry, we’ll take care of it for you.”

“And we know a good job for such a cute lady like you, too. Oh, it’s nothing difficult, you just need to spread your legs for a few old men.”

“We’ll just be taking your pay as the referral fee, though.”

The three laughed in sync, as if something was funny about all this.

So Panda’s pretty popular. That merchant guy offered ten small golds for him, so I wouldn’t be surprised if he’d fetch for twice the amount.

Normally, I would have frozen them all right away and let Blobsy snack on a few popsicles, but not this time. I stayed quiet, waiting for their move.

They must have thought I was tongue-tied out of fear. The three smirked, swaggering forward, posturing for intimidation.

“That’s right, just follow us and you won’t get-”

“-Gah?!”

One of the approaching men suddenly screamed and dropped to the ground.

“W-Wha?!”

“Uff...”

As the first man turned around in surprise, another one groaned and collapsed in a heap. The last man remaining whipped out his dagger in a panic. Something fast flew at him, shattering the dagger’s blade and smashing into the man’s head, sending him to unconsciousness.

The three men were dealt with in an instant. And then, a man hidden in the alley’s shadow squeaked and dashed off toward the main street.

Huh, that was the nice-looking merchant guy. I’d thought it strange he

Ever since I acquired Human Form (Wonderful) and continued with my evolution, the faithful recreation of my real body

— which used to be tiny due to the malnourishment — had now gotten a lot more meat on it. My height had shot up to about 155 centimeters. I looked like a middle-schooler.

I guess it's not surprising he didn't believe me when I said I was just eleven...

"But I guess I'm going to be twelve soon?"

"Yeah, that's right, gotta be it."

"About half a year later?"

"God damn, you really are just a kid!"

I had no idea whether he wanted me to be a kid or an adult. He needed to make up his mind already.

This was the powerful presence that I detected, the one with high magic. The guy looked to be in his mid-thirties, with short-cut black hair, golden eyes, and a *lot* of muscles. The very moment I first saw him, I threw out an immediate Identification, but for some reason the skill was obstructed. I couldn't get a clear look at his combat power.

Either he had an item to rein in his presence and interfere with other people's perception, like me, or there was another power at work... like, say, a blessing upon him.

Anyway, so I wanted to meet him because of his strength, but then it turned out I couldn't really figure it out. And then he just started his lecture, plus it seemed he's just going to be a pain in the ass, so I decided I didn't want anything to do with him.

"Well then, thank you, and excuse me—" I mechanically said and got ready to leave, but was interrupted.

"Hold on a minute."

He was about to grab me from behind. I hastily blocked.

"Heey, that's some good reflexes. You're gonna be a great adventurer

one day, kid.”

“...I *am* one.” At least that’s what my cover was.

Seemed like a nice guy, if a bit scary-looking. Still, I felt like we were people from different worlds. I just... didn’t want to be near him.

“Even the crowd isn’t a safe place for young ladies, much less alleyways. Come on, I’ll tag along until you get to the guild.”

“...what?”

“No need to be so reserved, girl. You’re an unfamiliar face. First time here? Oh, don’t worry about it, it’s where I’m going anyway.”

“...”

“*Ook.*” Panda tapped my shoulder, telling me to take the opportunity to get a guide.

The man’s clearly one of the good guys. I supposed I shouldn’t be making trouble here, considering all I had was a baseless feeling of discomfort.

“Name’s Gold. Nice to meet you!”

“...I’m Shedy.”

“Nice country, isn’t it. Everyone’s so energetic, so full of smiles!”

“I guess.”

On our way to the adventurer’s guild, Gold acted the part of a tour guide for me, the newcomer to the city.

Here and there were statues of the first-generation hero and fountains spewing endless water, all created from mana.

Gold attracted quite a few people coming to talk to him just by walking around town, and he always replied with a smile.

“And then evil appeared to threaten this peace. I don’t know what thoughts drove the Dark Lady to destroy the Saplings and sow such chaos, but I can’t forgive her.” Gold clenched his fists in apparent outrage.

I supposed to the humans of this world, world peace was really synonymous to nothing but human happiness, then.

“...what if she had a reason?”

“Impossible. Look at them, Shedy. What else could be more precious than the smiles of these people?”

“...I guess.”

I had to wonder if he was really looking. Behind the humans' cheer, did he see the stick-thin dwarves lifelessly, mindlessly swinging their hammers in the forges? Did he see the beastman girls, virtually naked, being forced to dance for their whole lives?

“...”

Precious things, huh... I supposed so. Different people valued different things, after all.

The adventurer's guild wasn't all that far away. Gazes fell upon us as soon as we entered. For a short moment, a few looks of suspicion were aimed at me. I thought trouble would be finding me soon, but once they realized Gold was there, most of them turned friendly.

“That's the reception. Just tell them my name, they'll pick out a nice request for beginners. I have a special request, so we'll part ways here.”

“Special request?” Hearing the unfamiliar term, I let slip a mutter.

Gold seemed to have finally settled on treating me as a child — he leaned in close, speaking as if he was colluding with a kid for secret conspiracies.

“Keep it a secret, alright? So there's a huge wasteland between this Torrann Caliphate and the Savanhuit Republic to the south. The Dark General called the Troll King and his minions had been inhabiting the area since long ago, and they'd apparently been showing up near highways. Then a few adventurers poked at them, and now the trolls are actually starting to get on the highway and attack carriages.”

“Adventurers...”

“Yeah, those guys. The ones getting preferential treatment by the Temples. There'd been a lot more of them recently.”

I moved only my eyes to follow Gold's gaze. At a table in a corner of the guild, a few young adventurers were hanging out, seemingly being shunned by the rest.

...they were players. It'd be a different story if it was another country, one where the Temples held some measure of power, but this place revered heroes. The Temples didn't seem to have much influence here. And so, with all the trouble players often got up to, they became targets of displeasure by the other adventurers.

"So you see, Shedy, remember, avoid those guys."

"Yeah."

Then Gold left, a receptionist guiding him deeper into the building.

I didn't think I'd hear about the Dark Generals that were mentioned in my Dark Lady explanation text here.

The Troll King, was it? I didn't know how powerful Dark Generals could be, but considering Gold said it was a special request, they should at least be quite a dangerous threat to human settlements.

"...tsk, damn fucker making fun of us."

A voice reached my ears. It came from the group of players I'd been paying a bit of attention to.

The players were supposed to be playing a game, so I was curious why they were still staying in this country. I focused a bit more on their direction, and I heard something interesting.

"Come on, Cardi, let's give up already. That's too many mobs for us to handle."

"Fucking hell, didn't you see how they made fun of us? We can't leave like this."

"Yeah, I know, but look at them. One high-ranked troll had at least 3000 combat power. Just ten of them would be enough to overwhelm us."

"Hero or not, no one fucking gets to lecture me. I'll show him, one way or

another.”

“Whaat? We gonna MPK again? Heheheh!”

I see. So to summarize: they had meddled with the trolls and led the monsters closer to the town; they got reprimanded by the supposed hero in this country; and then instead of having a rematch with the trolls to redeem themselves, they saw they were outmatched and decided to sabotage other people instead.

Each one of them only had around 1500 combat power, so I understood how unwinnable their rematch would be... but...

hadn't I heard that name somewhere? Cardi, Cardi... who was he?

And 'MPK'... if I remembered correctly the lesson before I came to this world, it meant to lead monsters toward someone else and foist the problem on them.

Were they not even aware they were plotting? They didn't even bother censoring themselves. Yet the other adventurers just ignored them, seemingly not bothering to listen to the words of idiots, or perhaps thinking it was just the puerile nonsense of children.

Oh well, if they really tried to do anything, somebody would be tattling on them to the guild. I wondered what would happen to them, then.

If they got a long jail sentence for their crime, they'd get their characters deleted, right? In that case... they shouldn't mind helping me out a bit before they disappeared.

I quietly approached. “Hey.”

“Whaa?! The fuck are you?” Cardi, or whatever the thuggish player's name was, raised his head.

I put on an unpracticed smile and whispered.

“I have something interesting for you... wanna hear about it?”

“Cardi, stop sulking already.”

“...shut up.”

They'd met with a strange girl and accepted a strange proposal.

A cute-looking NPC girl in her mid-teens had talked to them, and Cardi's comrades had quickly found themselves in a good mood. They were simply, honestly pleased they got an event quest. Yet looking at the girl, Cardi couldn't help but be reminded of the monster of mist that had slaughtered him twice. The white rabbit demon. The Dark Lady.

He was *intimidated* by the NPC girl.

Of course, this was just a game. He didn't feel the pain that came with death, only the force of the blow. And even then, even when his consciousness was immediately cut off from the Avatar and returned to the Temple to be resurrected, the mind of the real Cardi had still been dealt a severe blow.

He remembered the dull shine of the blade coming for his head.

He remembered those frosty red eyes, looking at him as if he was nothing more than a pebble by the roadside. He should have been using a fictional body in a fictional world, yet the *bloodlust* that he felt had seemed ready to take his real life.

For some time, he couldn't even look at the VR device without being assaulted by an inexplicable nausea.

All the same, Cardi still continued to play *World of Yggdrasia*. Not out of enjoyment, no. He just wanted to have the last laugh on the people who had reported him on the forums just because he was having a bit of fun in the game, and the people who had made a fool out of him in both real life and in-game. He wanted to prove himself superior to those who had created this game, as well as those who were enjoying it.

"Over here."

"Yes yes! We're coming, Mary!"

"Once it's over, we're all gonna be heroes too!"

Following the directions of the girl, who had named herself Mary, Cardi's party headed toward their destination on an express carriage.

Mary's story was as follows:

Provoked by Cardi's party, the Troll King, said to be a Dark General, and his subordinates were now encroaching upon human territory. But while the trolls were showing up on the highways, they still weren't getting close to the human towns, due to the barrier that protected the express railways connecting human countries together.

The magitech railway was one of the means through which trade between rural regions and far-off countries could happen. It was no exaggeration to call the train a cornerstone of the world's economy. The barrier protecting it was maintained by the vast amount of mana coming from the Saplings. It could handle even a low-ranked dragon.

The barrier was what restricted the scope of activity of monsters, including the trolls. It wasn't the kind of barriers that enclosed whole cities — it only protected certain lines at risk of monster attack, and it was supported by magitech artillery and soldiers. The Troll King was aware of all this.

However, the railway-protective barrier wasn't erected from the town. Every few kilometers, at every critical location, there was a station housing a magitool that was the core of the barrier. This knowledge didn't take much of an investigation — it was the stations' locations that were the more tightly-held secret. Only the garrison and the engineering magicians in charge of maintenance knew where they were.

Mary's idea was to find out the location of one station, lower the barrier strength, then lure some weak trolls through the affected barrier segment. Then they would report the "troll attack" to the guards, receive their reward money, and help out the guards before any other adventurers could get there. Their reputation would get a boost.

"...no way are things gonna go so smoothly." Cardi said. He wasn't entirely willing to do the quest, partially because of his own discomfort with Mary. On the other hand, the other members of his party held no such reservations.

"This is where our skills shine, isn't it? Judging from the quest content, it probably needed a ranger and a mage to trigger."

"Come on, Cardi, what're you talking about? Weird quest it may be, it's still an event quest. Just follow along and we're sure to succeed."

In reality, they wouldn't even know if the plan had any guarantee of

success. In a game, an event quest would force the NPCs to follow a predetermined course of action.

Once it's done, Cardi's party would gain prestige with the guild. No one would suspect them, and they would be heroes of the country... or at least that was the theoretical future.

Their first step was to not get caught by the patrolling guards, and to that effect, they were following along the off-limits railroad.

For the main duration of their travel, they'd used the express magitech carriage paid by the money Mary gave them. Top-grade carriages were really only 'horse carriage' in name: they didn't use horses, but magical engines instead. The jeep-lookalike vehicle worth 20 large gold coins were speedy things. The pleasant ride had gotten his party members even more excited, and even helped Cardi to slowly forget about his mistrust toward the quest.

"Alright, time for me to do my job."

The ranger — a class composed mainly of assassins — of their party began searching for the barrier magitool as he followed the track.

Around two hours later, just when they'd almost given up, they found one of the hidden magitool.

"My turn... wait, what?"

As the magician got ready to work on the magitool, he soon found out he lacked the required specialist knowledge. But then, just like a game cutscene, Mary's monkey jumped on the magitool and managed to do *something* with his flailing around.

Their next step was to find some trolls and lure them here. Cardi remembered Mary's earlier warning.

"Take notice of their strength. Don't pick any troll too powerful. You wouldn't be able to win, and the whole plan would fail."

"...don't hafta tell me that." Cardi replied sullenly.

Mary looked at him, gave a faint smile, then came close and whispered in his ears.

"But the reward money and the prestige you'd gain would also depend

on the strength of the enemy. If you want the greatest reward, if you want to be called Heroes, then you know the troll you should target, right? The guards should have magitech weapons. If you can make use of them, you might just win.”

“...”

Cardi wondered if they were some kind of quest items to help newbies. With the weapons, even if they made a mistake and actually lured in the Dark General himself, they might still be able to handle the boss.

Cardi listened, his face set in a frown. Yet every time he heard Mary’s voice, every time he saw her face, he felt as if his mind was descending into a deeper and deeper fog.

Cardi’s party separated from Mary after that, then got on the jeep to head toward the troll colony.

“How about those?”

“Really, you think those can do much to the guards?”

They had found a group of several trolls on the way, but the identification crystal revealed their combat power was only about 500. They wouldn’t be able to push the guards into the crisis that Cardi’s party was aiming for.

Groups after groups, the trolls were still lacking the combat power they seek. At first, they had been looking for mobs they could easily handle, but their judgement had gotten more and more desensitized until they were only looking for powerful monsters.

They were approaching the troll colony now. With their fear long since paralyzed, Cardi’s party lay eyes upon a high-ranked monster of 3000 combat power: the Troll General.

“...no. Let’s go a bit deeper.” Cardi said.

Unsurprisingly, his party hesitated. “H-hey, don’t you think it’s getting pretty dangerous already?”

He didn’t reply. All he had in his mind was Mary’s words, cloying, whispering into his ears.

The greatest prestige. The fame of Heroes. Status above any other

players. If Cardi could have that, he'd be able to turn the table on all those who looked down on him.

Deep inside him spoke the voice of a rational Cardi, a voice that said things couldn't possibly end so well, that said he could not trust the girl. Yet that voice was silenced by the strange *fog* upon his mind. Unwittingly, Cardi stood up from behind the boulders hiding the party from the trolls' sight.

"I...I'm gonna be a heroOOoO!!!"

He took out a consumable spell scroll of Fireball and aimed the projectile toward the troll colony.

The area attack burned the lower-leveled trolls, and howls of alarm rang out. From the stronghold made out of logs deep inside the colony, a huge troll appeared to answer their calls. The five-meters monstrosity roared at the sky in his rage.

[Troll King] [Dark General]

[Magic Points: 1200/1200] [Hit Points: 4600/4600]

[Total Combat Power: 36000]

Cardi's party squeaked, seeing the information the identification crystal revealed. As the King's roar rang out, all the trolls began moving.

"R-run-aagh!"

The warrior making a break for it was struck in his back by a flying boulder the size of a man's head. That single hit was enough to turn him into specks of light.

As one, Cardi's party all screamed and ran off. They didn't even have the leisure to retrieve the warrior's items.

If they could think clearly, they would have realized dying here would have limited their losses. But fear was ruling them.

They were guzzling down stacks of precious healing potions that they'd collected and left to gather dust in their inventory until now. All the same, one by one, they fell without a single gain to their names.

Still, Cardi thought he'd be safe as long as he could get inside the railway's barrier.

"Why..."

Yet all that awaited him was a *lack* of the barrier segment he was running for.

It was the same place with the magitool that Cardi's party had found. But Mary should have only reduced the barrier strength, not disable it.

From the other side of the train tracks, a horse-riding man rode up to them.

"Boy, what the hell are you doing here?!" He shouted at Cardi.

Once the man heard of the disappearance of part of the barrier, he had immediately departed, leading a squad of guardsmen. Gold, the Warrior, was here.

"I-I..." Cardi stammered.

"Provoking the trolls wasn't enough for you, fool?! You've even destroyed the barrier! Guards, arrest him!"

Upon the Hero's command, the guardsmen approached Cardi.

"I... I... aaAAAGHH!"

I should have been a hero. The man of the hour. More than anything those bastards making a fool out of me could ever be.

Cardi's obsession had blackened his heart and muddled his mind. He used a scroll of Explosion on Gold.

"Idiot!"

Gold jumped forward to cover for the guardsmen, parrying the explosion. But the deflection put the projectile on a path directly toward the magician who was repairing the barrier magitool, irrevocably destroying it.

"...impossible."

Gold was struck dumb by the outrageous happening, *coincidence* though it might have been. But with the Troll King's army advancing, he couldn't afford to waste any more time being surprised.

"W-wait, if we can use the magitech weapons..." Cardi muttered, even as he too was dumbfounded.

"You think we can just lug that stuff around?!" Gold yelled at him. He then gave an order, his teeth clenched tight. "Tsk, dammit... we're returning!"

Right at that moment, a soldier ran up at him.

"We have a problem, sir!"

"What the hell is it?!"

The soldier gulped, nervous in front of an angry Hero, then mustered up his courage to give the rest of his report.

"Monsters have appeared at the train stations of Torrann Caliphate and the Republic of Savanhuit!"

"...yeah, thanks. You can come back now."

I told Panda to get back from his hiding spot near the broken barrier magitool.

I used to only be able to know where my kins were, but now I could even share their senses and use my **[Causality Alteration]** through them. Perhaps it was due to my level increase into **[Archdemon]**, strengthening the bond I had with them.

Originally, it had been a power I could use as long as there was a connection — internet or otherwise — and magic, but now, this new development had opened up even more options in my plans.

I was actually short of hands now. If only I got a few more kins. Sadly, normal monsters either just ran away from me or tried to fight me. Monsters like those two were really rare, it seemed.

The shoddy plan I was using this time was nothing more than a gamble beholden to luck. I couldn't even call it a real plan. But well, *luck* was something I could handle.

To be honest, while it's true the plan was meant to hide my existence, I had to admit that destabilizing a spell from afar to destroy the magitool was quite a bit easier than directly modifying the magitool to do what I wanted it to.

And then I tried to get a group of players to lure in monsters. I think I saw them before somewhere... what's his name...

Cardi? Anyway, apparently the "trickster and guide of man's fate" part in my description had worked a little *too* well.

They actually got the Troll King himself.

His combat power was 36000. That's a Dark General all right. Before, he would have made for a tough opponent even for me.

If I'd known they'd managed to bag the Troll King, maybe I wouldn't have needed to go through all that trouble to get those monsters inside the barrier.

...well, whatever. You can never have too much preparation.

The swarm of Rock Lizards I chased into the station was tearing up the place.

Just like the tricks I'd used before, the more I repeated it, the better the humans would respond, and the more stringent their security would become. Still, I think I could use this a few more times.

Honestly, places with Saplings generally had more security anyway, both in terms of personnel and magic. Even if I could break through, I'd need time, which the humans could use to summon more reinforcements. It's a pain in the ass. Now, with the monsters showing up at the station, some of the guards in the building housing the Sapling had to be sent there.

All these were what one of the younger guards told me. I pretty much just asked. Disguising as an adventurer really made things simple. If anything, maybe my grown-up look actually helped out here?

Also, according to what Panda told me on his way here, the Troll King's army had split into two. The one led by the Troll General was attacking the Republic of Savanhuit, while the Troll King's was heading here. I anonymously fed the info to the adventurer's guild.

They probably wouldn't just believe it out of hand, but once they got confirmation, they'd most likely be forced to share most of their military supplies.

Anyway, until the Troll King gets here, maybe I'd deal with the buzzing watcher drones I'd been seeing all over the place.

Just enough to not be suspicious, of course.

"Gather up the resident guards and surround the station, now! Send the order for the knights to gather to the south of the castle!"

"Yes, sir!"

After his return to Torrann Caliphate, Gold gave his order to the soldiers. He watched the men ran off, his fists white-knuckled, then turned to head toward the castle in the capital.

If it had been up to Gold, he would have stayed at the railway segment that had lost its barrier to stop the Troll King's army, but the situation and his position did not allow that.

He ascended the castle. They must have had already heard the news. The knight who came to pick him up guided him right toward the caliph's office.

"So you're here, Gold! Come."

"...hello, brother."

Gold was the seventh child of the previous caliph, as well as the younger brother of the current caliph.

The caliph was an obese man clad in gaudy clothes. As soon as he saw Gold, he began impatiently tapping the table.

"Why did monsters show up at the station?! And the trolls, they should've been inactive ever since Father's time. Gold, explain!"

"A part of the railway's barrier was gone. It seemed the adventurers had something to do with it, but we hadn't determined their motive..."

"Who cares about that! Damn those Temple adventurers! I'm the

caliph of this country. I am *God* here! ...no, wait, maybe I can use this to discredit the Temples and get them off my land...”

“Brother, this is not the time. We need to deploy the Holy Knights right away!” Gold said, interrupting whatever plot his elder brother was muttering. The corpulent man opened wide his squinting eyes and began to panic.

“N-no! Isn’t the rumored Dark Lady aiming for the Sapling?! We can’t weaken the castle’s defense!”

“But we need the Holy Knights’ thaumaturgy to defend the walls from the Troll King! Else, the citizens will be...”

The Holy Knights of Torrann were users of a kind of holy magic called ‘Thaumaturgy’. It was more defensive than offensive, which was why the caliph wanted to keep them at the castle. But holy magic users were rare. If they were protecting the castle, they could only focus on erecting barriers for the Sapling and the caliph. If the troll horde could invade the castle, then their magic was only good for buying time.

In that case, Gold thought it’d be better for them to help reinforce the walls, stopping the trolls’ advance, and healing the wounded soldiers. Unfortunately, his idea was shot down immediately.

“This country only needs the Sapling and me, their god! As long as we survive, that’s all that matters! Gold... the Warrior. I’ll lend you my Royal Guards. Take your responsibility and deal with the trolls!”

“...understood, Your Majesty.”

Goldi von Torrann. The Hero called the Warrior.

He was one of the only three Heroes of this world. At the same time, he was royalty. As his brother, the current caliph feared him for his possible claim to the throne. He was not allowed the freedom to act.

Gold had no intention to take the throne. To prove it, he hadn’t taken a wife over the three-and-a-half decades of his life; he had sealed the equipment made from materials of the dragon he had hunted, never to be worn; and he had even parted ways with his former comrades once he was made the Hero. His life was spent following his brother’s

wishes.

Partly, it was due to his love for the country. But also, he wanted to fulfill his father's last wishes for him and his brother to stay as good siblings, to support each other.

Yet he could not see an inkling of worthiness in his older brother, the caliph. The man was not fit to rule.

"...we're moving out!"

"""Yes, sir!"""

The young men of the Royal Knights replied, their faces stiff.

Unlike the other countries, for the past few years, Torrann's Royal Knights had turned into an order of knights-in-name only. Their recruits joined only to have the suitable standing to work as escorts for foreign nobility, and the young noble kids joined only for the prestige.

There were still veteran knights remaining in the order, as well as some trained men with an actual sense of duty, but overall, the order was having problems both in the quantity and quality of their men.

At the moment, Gold had nothing more than simple equipment, nor were his old comrades here. He didn't know if he could win against the Troll King, one of the Dark Generals.

[Goldi von Torrann] [Race: Human

] [The Hero "Warrior"]

[Magic Points (MP): 700/700] [Hit Points (HP): 500/500]

[Strength: 90] [Vitality: 80] [Agility: 80] [Dexterity: 7]

[Swordsmanship 5] [Defense 4] [Offensive Magic 3] [Healing Magic 4] [Self-Reinforcement]

[Total Combat Power: 14700]

"Let's go!"

But as the Hero of this world, he must fight.

On the way, he received further information. The troll army that had slipped through the barrier and escaped to the west had split into two, and they were heading for this Torrann Caliphate and the Republic of Savanhuit.

Fearing the Troll King, the country had always been focusing their defense on the south-eastern direction. Their west side, where the front gate was located, might have the barrier for protection, but the walls themselves were thin, and it had only a third of the amount of magitech weaponry compared to the south-eastern side.

Gold couldn't recruit any more soldiers. The thousand resident guards were busy keeping the monsters at the station at bay, and there was no time to raise the militia. He had to make do with the existing force stationed at the west side: 400

knights and 1200 soldiers.

The military force of a large country was powerful. But on the flip side, a large country needed time to gather armies from their nobles and their rural areas.

"I'm not sure if I'm lucky or unlucky that the Troll King is coming here..."

As a hero, it was fortunate that the Troll King was coming to him instead of a country without a Hero. As royalty of this country, however, not so much.

He had wanted to recruit the help of adventurers. But while the caliph was plotting to eject the Temple — although the Guild might be a different story — then as long as the Sapling wasn't in danger, Gold could expect some sort of interference.

The Troll King's army was ignoring all the other towns, heading directly toward the capital. It would take them about three days. Meanwhile, it would be four days before the nobles could finish preparing their standing armies and arrive at the capital.

Simple math would say Gold needed to hold on for a day, yet even that single day of survival required preparations. And that precious time was wasted in the audience with the caliph. Gold was getting restless.

“The Hero!” “Victory to the Hero!”

Gold was on his way from the castle to the front gate when he was met with cheers, ringing out from the crowd of evacuating citizens.

They had the barrier, and they had the Hero. They believed they wouldn't lose, and their expressions showed as much.

Some weren't even evacuating, instead drinking and making merry as if it was a holiday.

Yet the barrier was no absolute.

Some rare monsters, like the Troll King and the Troll General, could force their way in through the barrier. The reason they hadn't done so was because even if they could get in by themselves, sheer number would still crush them, and they understood this.

All the same, if the Troll King could get inside, he would likely be heading straight for the barrier-generating magitool to destroy it.

The castle's barrier was erected from right next to the Sapling, but the city's barrier relied on several barrier stations. If just one of them was destroyed, the capital would fall.

In other words, the line of defense would have to hold the front gates and the walls from the troll army until noble reinforcements could arrive.

“...strange.”

Seated in a magitech carriage, Gold sensed a disturbance somewhere in the city.

He turned his head. In that direction was the facility to distribute converted magic power to the other establishments, as well as one of the stations holding a barrier magitool.

“Milord, is something wrong?”

“No...” Gold replied to the soldier, his unease still nothing more than just a vague feeling, “nothi-?!”

But before he could finish his words, a powerful magic signal pulsed from the magic distribution facility.

“Magic meltdown?!”

The very next moment, the dull roar of an explosion rang out from the facility.

“Whoa?!”

Despite the deafening sound, much of the explosion had been contained within the durable building. But judging from how one of the walls had collapsed and the flames were blazing, most of the explosion’s force must have been directed inside.

The city’s barrier flickered and disappeared. Horror kept Gold’s eyes pinned at the magic facility. There, he saw a girl slowly walking out of the flames.

Crimson eyes and scarlet dress.

Alabaster skin and snow-white hair.

And finally, a pair of long rabbit ears that could belong to no one else.

“...Whitehare, the Dark Lady!!”

“...Whitehare, the Dark Lady!!”

Despite the barrier, the Dark Lady had shown up inside the city.

She was the culprit behind the rapid destruction of eleven World Tree Saplings, guardians of the human race. She had been declared the Dark Lady for her dangerous ideology. Together, the large countries had signed a request for the three Heroes, including Gold, to defeat her.

Her combat power was unknown. According to eyewitnesses and rumors, she acted alone. Some said she had frozen a whole city, citizens and all.

The Dark Lady had astonishingly white skin and hair, blood-red eyes, and were clad in a similarly-colored dress that didn’t leave much to the imagination. Those rabbit ears that could belong to no one else fit with what Gold had heard of her, yet seeing her with his own eyes, he thought she looked no different from a normal, slender, cute-looking young girl, if he ignored her demihuman characteristics.

“...ugh.”

Just as Gold was about to glare at the Dark Lady, his vision and his thoughts wavered for a fraction. She was declared the Dark Lady due to the threat she posed, but could the rumors have been exaggerated? How could such a tiny girl possess such power? Her bare arms and shoulders looked so fragile, Gold thought he could break them just by a squeeze.

Even with the experience and instincts he'd honed until now, he thought it impossible that she could be more powerful than the Troll King, the Dark General approaching this city. Yet another part of him, the intuition of a Hero who had received a Blessing from the arch-elemental of light, dared not challenge the *girl* in front of him.

She was no person. She was an unfathomable *something* in the shape of a person.

“Milord, please give the order!”

“We'd turn that demihuman girl into naught more than rust on our blades!”

But not everyone shared his intuition.

Even with the wealth of experience Gold had, it was the first enemy he'd felt such a strange dissonance for. He wasn't even sure if the other Heroes could feel what he did.

“Wai-”

Before Gold's raspy voice could finish the order, the youths of nobility, his Royal Knights, had already pulled out their weapons and charged at the girl.

“Foul demihuman!” “Die!”

For a brief instant, the young men of nobility had been mesmerized by the sight of the alluring girl of white, but once they understood their opponent was a demihuman — in other words, *cattle* — they immediately saw her as nothing more than an animal to butcher.

The white girl silently narrowed her eyes at the attacking men. In a gust of speed, she intercepted, her sharp claws piercing their hearts.

Dying gurgles, painful cries, and fearful shrieks rang out. She was too fast, too strong. She was tearing throats, crushing necks, and stabbing hearts so effortlessly, as if the men were balloons and she was the needle.

“S-STOOOOOOP!!!”

Finally coming to his senses, Gold screamed, pulling out the greatsword strapped to his back. An aura of light surrounded him as he swung at the white girl. She took out a dagger in a flash, blades clashing in sparks and a shrill ringing of metal.

The girl immediately jumped backward after the clash. Her eyes slightly widened as she looked at Gold’s face. She discarded the dagger that was now nothing more than a handle, its former blade broken at the base.

“Damn you... Dark Lady!! Why are you doing this?!”

To Gold’s angry question, the girl named Shedy only tilted her head in response. She looked at the destroyed facility, then at the silent corpses of the Royal Knights, then turned back to Gold.

“Which one?”

“Everything!! Do you find joy in ruining the peace of this country? This world?” Gold shouted, enraged. Shedy just faintly frowned.

“...why would I enjoy it?”

“What?!”

“Whatever, it’s not important. By the way, are you sure you have the time to be talking with me?”

“Wha...”

The sound of something *breaking* rang from afar. Gold could hear faint screams of people.

“What is...”

“The barrier’s gone, you know? What’s protecting the walls? Even the lower-ranked trolls are coming. There’s only one thing that could be

happening.”

Shedy bluntly said, her voice level, cold, and impassive. Gold paled.

The time Gold estimated the Troll King would take to reach them had stood on the assumption that the barrier was working normally.

One of the barrier’s capabilities was to cover all the space of a limited area like a castle, filling the air not unlike a hemisphere of water. But for larger areas like towns and cities, it could only cover the outer layer of the area in the form of a wall, or perhaps a border line.

This type of ‘membrane’ barrier had its pros and cons. The disadvantage was that like the railway barrier, once monsters slipped through a part of it, they were free to act on the inside unimpeded. On the other hand, the advantage was that the barrier was more focused, more powerful, and the bigger it was, the better the range for its monster-repellant effect.

In other words, with the size of the enormous barrier covering the capital, its repelling effect extended for several kilometers. It should have slowed the trolls down quite a bit.

Even if the Troll King moved on ahead of the army and attacked by himself, the barrier and the walls should be able to withstand his assault until Gold could get there.

But in the end, the city had met with the worst case scenario. The Troll King was going ahead while the barrier was destroyed.

“You sure you don’t need to go?”

Shedy slightly tilted her head. Gold held his greatsword in a death grip, teeth clenched tight.

If he left the Dark Lady here to head to the walls, the castle wouldn’t have enough defenders. The Sapling might be destroyed.

If he fought the Dark Lady, the walls would fall. With reinforcements still a long way away, the Troll King would easily overwhelm the garrison, and the trolls arriving afterward would then be free to wreak havoc among the citizens.

Either he believed that the garrison can hold on, or he put his trust into the Holy Knights of the castle.

Either he prioritized protecting the country and the caliph as royalty, or he prioritized protecting the people as a Hero.

“...fuck!”

Gold ran for the walls.

He didn't know which was the right choice. Perhaps both Goldi, the royalty, and Gold, the hero, were wrong.

But he still moved. He moved as a man who wanted to save the townspeople, the children who had cheered for him with smiles on their faces.

And he thought he heard the faint voice of the Dark Lady behind his back.

“...correct.”

He must have misheard.

*

“Troll King!!”

Gold arrived at the battle in an express carriage. He saw a rampaging five-meters giant swinging around a humongous axe.

Just as he thought, it seemed the Troll King had gone ahead alone. He didn't see any of the King's subordinate trolls, but his opponent was still a Dark General. The garrison were hanging on by a thread. Every swing of the King's battleaxe tore apart limbs and flesh of several soldiers. The garrison soldiers were attacking with everything they had, but arrows were bouncing off the Troll King's thick skin, and flesh burned by spells took only a moment to heal.

The most dangerous thing about a troll wasn't their enormous size nor their freakish strength. It was their regeneration.

[Troll King] [Dark General]

[Magic Points: 965/1200] [Hit Points: 4540/4600]

[Total Combat Power: 36000]

Could Gold win? He had less than half of the King's combat power, no specialized equipment, and no old comrades.

“No, I *must* win...”

Around half of the garrison, formerly numbering two thousand, were either dead, or wounded and were retreating.

They needed to either defeat the Troll King before his minions could arrive, or they needed to hold on until the nobles came with reinforcement.

Both might be impossible. Or they might not win even with reinforcement.

All the same, retreat was not allowed for a Hero. The only choice for Gold was to fight, until either victory or death.

“Here I come, Troll King!”

His opponent replied with a roar.

Greatsword clashed against battleaxe. They were dealing wounds to each other, all the while healing themselves with spells or regeneration.

At first glance, they were equal. But even if Gold was barely managing with his speed and magic, he lacked power and support. His sword could not deal any critical wounds to the Troll King, yet he himself had received heavy blows, and every time he healed himself with spells, he was losing magic. Slowly but surely, Gold was being cornered.

Some among the garrison could still move and were aiding Gold, but they were soldiers with only a hundred, maybe two hundred combat power. They were wasting their lives without even managing to slow down the Troll King.

After some time, the battle moved away from the walls and into the urban area.

“Ugh...”

Bruised and bleeding, Gold still readied his greatsword. On the other hand, while the Troll King had lost some magic, most of his external wounds had healed.

It was *hot*. Gold didn't know if it was because of his wounds, or because of his fatigue. So hot that sweat was pouring off of him, and his lungs were burning with every breath he took. As Gold brandished his sword, preparing to continue the fight, he noticed a kid cowering by the side of a house that looked like it could collapse at any time.

“...wha...”

Perhaps the little one hadn't managed to evacuate in time. The kid was crying and rooted to the spot, perhaps out of fear.

The Troll King roared and attacked, taking advantage of Gold's moment of distraction. He didn't have the strength to block the attack with his sword. And if he dodged, it would hit the kid.

Gold howled. He wasn't thinking. He just jumped at the kid, using his own body as a shield.

With his current condition and his defense, he might just die together with his protectee. Even so, Gold could not ignore the child.

But the Troll King bellowed, this time out of pain. Suddenly, blood spurted out of the monster, as if his old wounds had all reopened at the same time. His flesh twisted, his bones broke, and finally, his stomach ruptured from the inside. The herculean Troll King collapsed as a hunk of meat.

“...wha... what's...”

Gold could only stare dumbfounded. And then his eyes caught the girl of white appearing from the bloody mist, herself covered from head to toe by the blood of the Troll King.

“...t-the Dark Lady...?! Why are you...?”

“No reason, really... If I had to say, well, I suppose it's my reward for trying to save a kid.”

“Wha...”

Gold was bewildered. What was this girl? She possessed enough power to effortlessly put down a Dark General. She was sowing chaos throughout the world. She was the enemy of all. Why would she save children?

The blood marring her pure-white skin disappeared, as if absorbed into nowhere. Then Gold saw what she was holding in one of her hands. His eyes widened in shock.

“Y-you... that is...”

“Oh, yes, here, gift for you. Very obvious message, isn’t it?”

She unceremoniously placed it on the debris. It was the head of the caliph of Torrann, faintly frosted, face frozen in a rictus of fear.

“B-brother... then... the castle...”

“Fell. Nobody survived. Sapling’s gone too. You get it, don’t you?”

“Wha...”

Then this oppressing heat was due to the destruction of the Sapling?

The caliph was killed, the Sapling was destroyed, the castle had fallen. Torrann Caliphate would be no more.

Gold laid down the unconscious child. He put his bloodied hands on the greatsword he had dropped and pointed it toward Shedy, arms trembling.

“Why... why do you save children and do *this*?! Whitehare! Did you think nothing of this city?!” Gold shouted.

The Dark Lady killed people. Destroyed countries. Defeated a Dark General. Saved a child. He was thrown off balance by the contradictions and the cruelty she had shown.

Shedy tilted her head in puzzlement, then pointed at a nearby wreckage.

“...what?”

“If you hadn’t covered for the kid back then, they’d probably have been killed. But then, why did you not save her?”

“What...?”

Gold strained his eyes. He saw a woman, possibly a canine beastman, buried among the wreckage. She had long since drawn her last breath.

“A demihuman...”

“Isn’t she *life*, just like you? Why the discrimination? She was alive just a while ago, you know?”

“Huh...?”

From where Gold was standing, both the beastwoman and the kid would have been in his view. But Gold only saw a single person to save. The human kid.

“Demihumans... aren’t humans.”

“Really? Funny that. To me, humans, demihumans, goblins, they’re all equally life.” Shedy said, sounding like she was saying the most obvious thing in the world.

“You jest...” Gold let out a strained laugh, trying to wave off her words as nonsense, but somewhere deep inside him, he was disturbed.

He felt as if he’d just realized something crucial. He was the Hero who protected the world... but *whose* world was he protecting?

Gold was tongue-tied. He didn’t know how to give form to the thoughts whirring in his mind. Shedy looked at him coolly, then turned away.

“Well, if you don’t know, that’s fine. Farewell.”

“...”

In a daze, Gold could do nothing but stare at the Dark Lady as she disappeared in mist. Then he collapsed on his knees, sword clanging on the ground.

A few days later, the troll army was routed after having lost their leader. But Torrann Caliphate, now no longer possessing a Sapling, could not sustain themselves as a country. The Republic of Savanhuit to the south had also lost their Sapling.

With the downfall of the two large countries, the small countries around them began to be slowly ground down by the remnants of the

troll army.

Chapter 59 PLOTS AND PLANS

As the troll army lost their King — their overpowered patron that was a Dark General — they'd also lost their cohesion, and were routed by the army of Torrann Caliphate.

But they were trolls. Monsters said to have skulls as thick as the size of their brains. In just scant moments, they'd even forgotten the loss of their King. They got a few Troll Generals to be their new bosses and continued rampaging throughout the local region.

In the end, Torrann Caliphate, having lost their Sapling and their caliph, could neither continue fighting, nor could they deal with the chaos. The country was trampled under troll feet.

Well, if they had that Gold guy, they'd probably be able to hold on for a while.

“Ook!”

“Welcome back, Panda.”

He seemed tired after his trip. He didn't climb on my shoulder, instead clinging behind my waist together with Blobsy.

Panda did good work provoking and luring the Troll King, while Blobsy did her part too. I'd give them treats later.

Due to the rampaging troll remnants, the surrounding small countries had found themselves in quite the crisis. If only I could actually come for their Saplings...

I mean, there were tens of thousands of watcher drones flying toward those countries right now. The drones monitoring the Troll King must have seen me when I crushed him. The drones were transparent, but if I squinted, I could see them swarming like locusts.

I'd managed to deal with the Saplings of Torrann Caliphate and the Republic of Savanhuit, two large countries. I supposed that's pretty good for the time being.

Anyway, the Troll King might have looked like an easy kill, but really, I was just a hard counter for him.

The Troll King had 36000 combat power. Thanks to Gold's efforts, the monster's magic points had been ground down by quite a bit. Even so, I probably wouldn't win so easily if I fought him head-on.

It was the Troll King's high-speed regeneration that had given me such a simple win.

.The Troll King probably had more powerful regeneration than normal trolls. And with the pea he had for a brain, he'd never fought with his defense in mind. He cared nothing for his wounds as long as they didn't kill him. With just a peek, I already saw hundreds of thousands of nearly-fatal wounds in his past.

I just needed to use **[Causality Alteration]** on some ten-odd locations among them, turning them into the worst outcome possible, and that was enough to transform the Troll King into a lump of meat.

I had acted casual, but honestly, just that single attack of mine had already taken around ten thousand of my magic. If the Troll King had survived that, I'd have had a bit of trouble on my hand.

One of those nearly-fatal wounds had been dealt by that Gold guy. Must be karma. Maybe he was one of the Heroes?

So anyway, that was how I finished him off. It'd been a long time since I gained experience from a monster.

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Archdemon Lv. 14]

□The rabbit demon of Laplace. Trickster and guide of man's fate.

[Magic Points: 71,000/71,000] 15,000↑

[Total Combat Power: 78,100/78,100] 16,500↑

[Unique Skill: <Causality Alteration> <Cyber-Manipulation> <Absorption> <Materialization>]

[Racial Skill: <Fear> <Mist Form>]

[Simple Identification] [Human Form (Wonderful)] [Subspace Inventory]

[Dark Lady]

With this much power, I probably wouldn't lose to most opponents. But there were still three Heroes, several remaining large human countries, and even interference from Earth to worry about.

I was fighting to fulfill the contract with the World Tree. To take revenge against the corporation, and to avenge my comrades who had been in the same boat as me, whose faces I had never seen.

But I had another reason to fight.

"So I heard our Dark Lady the Bunny had just taken down another country?"

"Torrann? Didn't it fall because of the Dark General-class called the Troll King? I thought the NPC hero won, but not before the Sapling was destroyed?"

"Nah, that's just the official story. I heard that at the time, the Temples weren't allowed to intervene, so nobody traveled there. This is according to some guy posting on another forum outside who got his character deleted, apparently."

"Oh yes, I know that story. If I remember correctly, he was the player who got arrested by the local guards for luring the Troll King toward Torrann, right? According to his whining, he had managed to escape during the Troll King mess, but then got put on wanted posters all around the world. The guy deleted his character in tears after that."

"Wait, so it wasn't a forced character deletion, but he did it himself? Couldn't he just change his appearance and name or something?"

"You need to pay real money for that. From what I've heard, those players were middle-schoolers in real life. Their action to lure monsters to attack a whole city like this time was deemed 'a disturbance to other players', so they got slapped a fine of 200 bucks as a penalty to change character. They couldn't pay."

"Holy crap. At least it's not account deletion."

“Must be a right mess for those players who were basing in Torrann and Savanhuit.”

“So did they really see the Bunny?”

“The guy said a weird girl tricked them, and she turned out to be the Dark Lady.”

“That doesn’t prove anything.”

“But there was even an analysis website that concluded that if the Troll King really had 36000 combat power, then it’s very unlikely the Hero could actually win. Though on the other hand, the Bunny wouldn’t have a reason to do so.”

“More importantly, it’s seriously looking like there aren’t going to be any country to start your game in, sooner or later.

What are the devs thinking?”

“I’ve heard that some players are beginning to move to the Central Continent. Some high-ranked players are volunteering to help the lower-ranked move.”

“Wait, we can teleport once for free, right? Maybe I’ll move to Central too.”

“You can’t bring anything beside quest items, though.”

“I suppose it’s about time to try it out...”

“Aaah, that thing?”

“Yepyp. That player event. Wanna join?”

“Yeah, ○○××○△××△, so...”

“Wait, what?”

“Oh, whoops, sorry. I’m censoring myself with ×○△×... don’t want ○○× to find out, after all.”

The fall of Torrann Caliphate and Savanhuit Republic had shocked the whole world.

The large countries had just jointly requested the three Heroes for the subjugation of the Dark Lady barely days ago.

Countries worldwide had just begun preparing their armies and tightening security for the Dark Lady, and she had already attacked. She had won. Her victory might have been an ambush during the battle between a Dark General and a Hero, but it was still more than enough to deal a heavy blow to the pride of the large countries.

The Warrior said he had met with the Dark Lady during his battle with the Troll King.

According to the Warrior, just as he was about to lose, the Dark Lady had saved him, but it was more likely that she had simply seized the opportunity when the Troll King was busy with him. Even if that was the truth, the human governments still decided to recognize the deed of killing the Troll King to belong to the Warrior as a way to raise the citizens' morale, but the Hero himself had refused. He had since disappeared.

“Really, the guy's so uptight.”

Quarancinq, City of Magic. A large country in the Western Central Continent.

While the City of Magic only had a population of four hundred thousand, around the same as a small country, it and the Academy City of Cinqres were countries for scholars and researchers of all things magical, the holy lands for all magicians.

In the center of the country lay a castle, its spire rumored to be the tallest building in the whole world. The castle was both the royal palace and the world's most prestigious magic academy. The headmaster of the Magic University, at the same time one of its instructors as well as the king of the country itself, could be seen strolling around and engaging new students in friendly chats from time to time.

But the spire, christened ‘Tower of Truth’, held its own dark secrets. In this City of Magic, magicians recognized to be top-class were offered a laboratory space in the tower. The Tower of Truth was where

questionable research and inhumane experiments were being conducted, far away from the eyes of the wider world.

In one of those laboratories, a room so extravagant one could mistake it for a royal suite of a first-class hotel, was a beauty in her late twenties with hair as red as a blazing inferno. Wetting her scarlet lips with a sip of blood-red wine, she waved the glass in a light flourish to the man in front of her.

“So you came to me because the Warrior had disappeared?”

“Not so, my lady. Since the beginning, we at the Temples had already believed that you, the Sage, was the ideal person to come to for this plan.” A tall, brown-haired man replied with a dashing smile.

Marlene, the Sage.

With her vast magical capacity, the woman had mastered magic until the seventh rank when she was only in her twenties.

She was the most powerful magician in this world, as well as one of the Heroes.

While her appearance was that of a quintessential fire mage, she was, in fact, well versed in all the elements. Her healing magic had cured tens of thousands of people.

Marlene had been the inventor of a new type of healing spell. All the royalty and nobility throughout the world clamored for her attention, but she refused them, saying it made no difference whether her patient was a king or a beggar, and she continued to prioritize her work as a Heroine.

“You said you were... Mason?”

“Indeed, my lady.”

“The terms of the Temple’s request for me included the development of a new spell by using the mana they supply, and the capture of the Dark Lady by said spell. Is that right?”

“The capture of the Dark Lady is not required of you. Please do so only if an opportunity presents itself. However, if you can preserve the brain and organs, or even keep the head unwounded, there would be a

bonus reward for you.”

“Understood. How about you have a drink with me?”

“My apologies, it is currently work hours for me.”

The contract she had with the Temples required her to develop a new spell, and to acquire a biological sample of Whitehare, the Dark Lady.

And in return, for the next 50 years, the Temples would supply mana for her experiments, as well as help her acquire the *subjects* that had been getting less and less available recently.

Mason left. Marlene licked off the last drops of wine on her lips, then headed to her lab with a chuckle. She opened the door that led to the subject storage room.

The room was filled with good-looking boys, both demihumans and humans, all with limbs restrained. Eyes of anguish greeted her.

“I’m back. You’ll be having more friends soon. I won’t need to be as frugal with my experiments, I should think.”

Marlene cheerfully took out her torture tools, further sending the boys into the depths of despair.

“... damn her... damn her... damn her...”

Touze Caliphate had only a single large capital city. Outside of the farming district, its citizens all lived at the city, with the upper class and middle class of six hundred thousand living inside the enormous protective city walls, while the lower class of one million and two hundred thousand people lived outside the walls.

Outside the walls, in one of the lakeside resort villas of nobles, a young woman of nobility was standing in the garden, herself clad in a grimy dress. Again and again, she was stabbing her knife into a tree as if it was a voodoo doll.

Her name was Salia.

Her father was a knight officer. She'd been pushed into becoming the emperor's bodyguard in the hope that her looks would attract him into taking her as a concubine, but the woman herself had welcomed it and made it into her own goal.

Yet the path to her dream had veered off-track ever since that rabbit beastman girl, Shedy, showed up.

Salia had been abnormally antagonistic to Shedy. Her twisted emotions had turned into sheer hatred, and at the battle of Xontdix, she had massacred the demihumans to soothe herself. Then Shedy had frozen the skin of her face.

She had been rescued by Xontdix's knights just before the Dark Lady Whitehare gave her display of power. Her face had refused to heal completely even with the best spells, and combined with the insubordination she'd displayed in acting by herself, she'd been sent back home, away from her position, for her so-called 'long-term recuperation'. Her father, the knight officer, had scorned her as 'useless', and had banished her outside of the walls.

The only people at the villa were her and an old caretaker couple.

She had people to serve her food and to do her laundry. But she continued to be a prisoner to her hatred of Shedy. She hadn't been eating, hadn't been bathing. She just kept on stabbing the tree.

The grass rustled with footsteps. Salia stopped. She looked up, glaring at the interruption, her face beset with uncontrollable twitches. Standing in front of her was a man with eyes in the same glare and a demented smile.

"Heyo. The name's Brian. Wanna join me to take revenge on the Bunny?"

A/N: Factions surrounding Shedy:

□ 1st faction: The Temples

The local headquarters of the Earth-based pharmaceutical and defense conglomerate, as well as the Developers managing the MMORPG. The anti-rabbit project had changed hands from the 7th research center to the 4th.

□ 2nd faction: Regular Players

An enormous faction consisting of around three million people, but without unity. Most had no awareness of the truth.

Some of the players had begun to act.

□ 3rd faction: The Large Country Coalition

A worldwide organization to oppose the Dark Lady Whitehare and her assault on the Saplings. Perception of the Coalition differed depending on the region.

□ 4th faction: The Heroes

Included the Warrior, the Blademaster, and the Sage. Officially, they had accepted the Coalition's request to subjugate the Dark Lady as their mission, but no one knew their true thoughts.

□ 5th faction: The Demihumans

People oppressed by the human race. Despite the destruction of the Saplings, some among them had instinctively realized that the Saplings weren't gone forever. They had taken the opportunity to begin a resistance movement.

□ 6th faction: The Dark Generals

There were three Dark Generals on Yggdrasia: the Troll King, the Orc King, and the Ogre Lord. They were embroiled in endless strife with many, including the human race and the Heroes.

□ 7th faction: The Revengers

Brian, Salia, and others who had sworn revenge on Shedy.



Chapter 60 PRELUDE TO CHAOS

World of Yggdrasia, a world sustained by the World Tree and ninety-nine Saplings.

Tolldorre was a breathtakingly beautiful large country situated to the north of the Western Continent. People called it “the Gateway to the West.”

Inside a thick forest within the country, several monsters were huddling together. The rag-tag group consisted of beast-type, bird-type, goblinoid-type, insect-type, and more, all monsters of different races and ecologies. They were staying vigilant of their surroundings, exterminating the occasional stray monsters with unnatural coordination.

“So that’s everyone, pretty much?”

“Two or three haven’t shown up yet. Looks like they’re having a bit of trouble joining.”

“It’s fine, isn’t it? Not like all of us can show up every time.”

“Yeah. Besides, we’ll still be getting new members.”

“Alright, let’s get started. Everyone, make parties of five or six, then we’ll go leveling.”

They were normal players using monster avatars.

At first glance, they simply looked like a group of online friends playing together, but they hadn't been setting up secret conclaves in the middle of a forest far away from human eyes just because their avatars were enemies of humans.

“What’s the level range we should aim for?”

“Considering we’ll be discovered by humans sooner or later, at least equivalent to Rank 3. We need one evolution and one rank-up, but honestly I prefer a bit more strength than that.”

“Man, the next evolution’s gonna be a long way away. But if I’m going to be seriously traveling the world, then I wanna get to Rank 5. Maybe one thousand total combat power or thereabout.”

These players were using ‘mods’ — unofficial modifications to the game — that allowed them to log in without going through the official channels and away from the developers’ watching eyes.

As they weren’t under developer observation, they wouldn’t be able to request developer help if their avatars met with bugs or glitches, and if something went wrong with their VR devices due to a bug in the mod, their warranties wouldn’t apply.

These players still risked the dangers to log in because they had begun to hold suspicions toward the developers, as well as toward the game world itself.

Everything began when a player attempted to use a simple mod and found out it didn’t work. They simply wanted to pretty up the status screen and other such visual elements to their liking. This type of mod didn’t affect gameplay, and other games generally turned a blind eye towards them, yet the mods that should have worked in *World of Yggdrasia* hadn’t. All of them.

The modders hadn’t been able to mess with the system of mana absorption that had replaced the normal experience system; the use and acquisition of special skills like **[Identification]** ; as well as **[Spells]** and **[Combat Arts]** . They hadn’t been able to modify most aspects of *World of Yggdrasia*, as if the things happening there *weren’t programmed*.

Then one day, a player had posted the following words on a personal website:

“It felt just like I was going on a tour to another country in real life with my avatar.”

Debate erupted. People discussed the overly-wide game world, the too-realistic NPCs, and the things no one would’ve batted an eye to in the real world but wouldn’t make any sense in a game. As more and more people came to hold suspicions, the aforementioned personal website was abruptly frozen by the service provider. This only further fueled the speculations.

A group of players continued their discussions on private servers or on heavily-locked-down Asian servers. The programmers and hackers among them began creating a mod to fool the developers’ eyes. They planned to log into and discover the mystery of *World of Yggdrasia*.

Currently, there were 17 members in the group. They were thinking of inducting another ten-odd new people in their next recruitment.

Some were in it because they felt the corporation was lying to them. Some had been feeling guilty for hurting the demihuman slaves. And though their thoughts varied, behind it all, one single wish united the group.

“Let’s gain enough strength to travel as fast as we can, then we can meet up with the Dark Bunny Lady!”

“””YEAAAAHH!!!”””

“So we meet again, my lovely little bunny! You might have gotten the drop on me last time, but I swear on my name, Calimero the Hero, that I shall put an end to your atrocities on this very day!”

Standing there was a young man around twenty clad in armor of glittering silver, with sparkling golden hair and blue eyes on a

handsome face that looked to have known none of life's hardships. He was twirling his overly-decorative longsword with his fingertips. He smiled, showing his teeth, white as if bleached, then pirouetted into a striking pose.

[Calimero] [Race: Human

] [The Idiotic, Perverted Blademaster]

[Magic Points (MP): 600/600] [Hit Points (HP): 350/350]

[Total Combat Power: 14400]

Only silence answered the man. They were in a forest to the north of the Western Continent, where, by all accounts, it should have been impossible for the two to have come across each other. The mango-lookalike fruit that Shedy had picked for her kins froze in an instant, then shattered in her grip.

This was not the first time she encountered Calimero.

It had started after she destroyed the Saplings of Torrann Caliphate and Savanhuit Republic. In the two weeks or so afterward, Calimero had kept showing up out of nowhere to interfere with Shedy's worldwide quest time and time again.

"...hmp!" Shedy stomped the ground, propelling herself forward into a kick.

"Whoa!"

Calimero barely dodged it with a tumble, then stood back up in a single gravity-defying move. He flicked his bangs, as if brushing off the dirt, and showed her a smile full of white teeth.

"So intense, just as always. Do you want to meet me that much?"

A vein faintly popped on Shedy's forehead.

Despite the two of them speaking the same language, she'd felt like Calimero had never understood anything she said.

She'd attacked him, of course. She'd fully intended to kill him. Yet time after time, Calimero survived. Time after time, he showed up in

front of her in the most unexpected places.

Calimero was a genius. The greatest genius of this world.

He had been born as the third son of a certain count. In a twist of fate, by three years old, he'd received a Hero's Blessing from an elemental; by six, he'd defeated the knight leader of his country with swordsmanship alone; by nine, he'd seduced and eloped with the queen; and by twelve, he'd defeated the strongest swordsman of Yggdrasia to claim the title of Blademaster for himself.

He was the polar opposite to Shedy's seriousness.

He, by dint of being a genius, had never had an attack hit him ever since he was born. He'd never suffered anything as *uncool* as a skinned knee, much less a wound. He'd never even come down with a cold, much less a serious sickness.

It was perhaps the reason why he'd never had any injury that Shedy's **[Causality Alteration]** could latch onto. Even when she'd blown up the whole area to bury him alive, somehow, he still lived.

The genius was truly loved by the gods.

At the same time, his personality did not exactly endear him to many. Every time the Warrior saw Calimero, he gave a look of pure exasperation and sighed a sigh deeper than the ocean. Every time the Sage met him, she scowled at him in disdain, saying "don't come any closer to me, halfwit."

Calimero, the ultimate genius, only had a single weakness, if it could even be called one.

"Please stop doing bad things! I'll come with you to apologize to everyone, and we'll all live together in peace. I've already built a cute little rabbit house for you, right next to Linda's and Lily's place!"

There was a legend surrounding the Blademaster Calimero.

One day, he was invited to a dinner party at a certain royal palace. There, he had made advances on the queen even as the king was beside her; he had proposed to the princess behind them; he had seduced the feline beastman girl that the royalty was keeping as a pleasure slave, even as she was standing further behind in mute

disbelief; he had tempted the royal pet, a female dog named Lily, to help delay the guards as he ran; and he had cajoled a mare named Linda to help him escape.

Calimero was a skirt-chaser. An inveterate woman-lover. Some said he loved women so much he would seduce anything, even a dragon, as long as they were beautiful and biologically female.

“WHOOOOAAAAHHH?!!”

Shedy blasted arctic mist from her hands, blowing away both the posing Calimero and the seventeen monsters currently running toward them.

She turned to blankly glared at the direction of Calimero, now nothing but a far-off silhouette, then tilted her head toward the monsters that were practically bouncing toward her as soon as they saw her. Meanwhile, she continued to pick some fruits and move toward the next country.

“Hah!!”

Several minutes later, Calimero broke apart the frozen ground and emerged.

“Oof, that’s cold! Hahahah, the little bunny sure is shy!”

In just a single instant, he had instinctively smashed apart the ground and warded off the cold with his magic. He suffered no serious wounds. He looked toward the direction his sword was pointing to on the ground.

“Alright, that way.”

The Hero Calimero cheerfully muttered. He began walking toward the direction where Shedy was last seen.

Chapter 61 THE SINISTER SAGE

“My, you’re fast.”

“Anytime you call, lady Marlene. Besides, ‘fast’ should be our line.” Mason, the ambassador to the Temples, said with a dashing smile.

They were at the Tower of Truth in Quarancing, the City of Magic. The owner of the room, Marlene the Sage, smiled in satisfaction.

“With my skill, it’s... well, I wouldn’t say it was *simple*, but the spell you requested had been the target of worldwide research since some time ago. Furthermore, this is Quarancing, the pioneer of the world in magical research, and I am the greatest magician of all. It didn’t take much time to complete the spell. Still experimental, though.”

The Temples had requested the Heroine Marlene to develop several spells.

First, a new type of magical battery to retain mana that didn’t use magic stones.

Second, a radar system to detect magical signals worldwide.

Third, a magic circle of teleportation, a sixth-rank spell only usable by a few people throughout the whole world.

And fourth, a mana absorption system that worked through spells.

Marlene picked up the simply-designed Magic Gun leaning by the wall near her. She held it up into an aiming stance.

“This is good. I’d tried it out on my waste slaves, and I have to say it’s *exciting* stuff. But it’s true that it’s using too much magic. Even the average magicians wouldn’t be able to handle it, much less normal soldiers.”

Magic guns consumed the user’s magic instead of using gunpowder. They fired bullets made out of copper or silver, which were materials with high affinity to magic power.

During these last few years, thanks to the technological revelations

coming from the ‘God’ of the Temples, single-shot magic guns were now capable of rapid-fire through the use of magazines. All the same, they required a lot of magic to output high firepower. And even if the guns were capable of rapid-fire, using the mana that would’ve been consumed to

cast spells instead would still be more versatile, and the complexity of the guns made them quite costly. They hadn’t yet come into widespread use.

There were tools to seal in mana in order to cast spells without consuming the user’s magic, such as Magic Staves.

However, the mana-storage-capable materials used in such tools were extremely expensive precious metals, such as pure gold or mythrill silver. One hundred large gold coins were the normal price for a mythrill staff, and while staves of pure gold would only cost about half, they needed to be coated by a thin layer of lead to prevent the mana from leaking, making them far too weighty for general use.

The magic gun Marlene was holding was the latest rapid-fire model supplied by the Temples. It had both a semi-auto and a fully automatic firing mode.

The first designs had made use of mana batteries in the form of small boxes the size of a pen case attached to the gun. Of course, the batteries were made of solid gold and lead, and the woman working as Marlene’s assistant was already staggering just by carrying them.

But this gun had no such battery. While Marlene the Heroine could handle the mana consumption of the full-auto shooting mode, she still gave it back to Mason, who was no magician.

“There, I’ve carved a mana collecting circle on it. The magic circle’s still in development, and it’s only going to have 30

shots, but you show it to your bosses and get me more funds.”

“...understood.”

“Sure enough, collecting mana with spells still demanded a certain amount of spell knowledge and skill in the user. It’ll take time for me to develop a magic circle anyone could use, so you just take that spell formula back first. I’ll give you the magic circle later.”

Currently, countries worldwide were gathering mana from the Saplings by connecting them to several enormous magic stones by mythril electrodes, and then extract the magic from those magic stones.

Only some Children of God, by making use of their special abilities, were capable of directly extracting magic power from living beings like the Saplings. While there had been some pre-existing research on the matter, it did nothing to diminish the fact that Marlene had managed to turn theory into something usable in such a short amount of time. Her skill was the real deal.

“Understood. May I ask about the other two requests, as well as the progress in capturing Whitehare?”

“A teleportation circle anyone could use would be tough. You need to at least have someone capable of sixth-rank spells to activate it, and I don’t think there’s any other way. Ah, but that’s what I’m using to chase down the rabbit this time, as a matter of fact.”

“Oh, is that so?” Mason smiled, looking a lot more interested.

Marlene activated a spell, and a map of the world appeared on blank panels. Here and there on the map were shining points of light.

“Would this be... the detection spell?”

“Yes, it’s detecting every creature with over 500 magic. If I didn’t limit it to creatures only, the Saplings would turn the whole map white. The spell can only detect things near the observation equipment, though.”

The Dark Lady Whitehare seemed to possess an ability to disrupt identification, so Marlene couldn’t search by magic power value. But she reasoned that when Whitehare moved, the strong monsters near her must move as well.

“Then please allow the Temples to help you install the observation equipment... hmm, what would this be?”

“...powerful magic signals are moving fast. I’ll deploy a squad 10 kilometers ahead. You!”

“””Yes, my lady!”””” Answering Marlene’s call, an assorted group of good-looking boys from early to late teens lined up in front of her, all equipped with the new magic guns.

“I’m sending you to this place. If you see Whitehare, kill her.”

What the hell was that *thing*...? I mean, he introduced himself so I knew who he was, but that didn’t make him any less disgusting.

And he was a Hero, the Blademaster. Were the humans *really* fine with that sort of Hero...?

Well, he’s gotta have died this time for sure.

I put the fruits for Blobsy and Panda into my **[Inventory]** and started moving.

I was only scouting today, and the two were still tired from last time, so they were resting at the World Tree.

With how lucky they were, if they’d been with me, maybe that idiot Hero wouldn’t have shown up. I was a *really* unlucky girl, after all...

“...mm?”

After running for nearly an hour, a mountain full of withered trees and a ravine that looked like a deep crack in the earth came into my view. Perhaps this was the result of the humans bending mana to their will. The problem had gotten so severe the World Tree even asked a demon for help, so this was a common sight around the world.

But then, as I continued running along the ravine, probably getting close to a human country, the space in front of me suddenly began to *twist*.

rattatatatatat!

“Whoa?!”

I jumped the moment I heard the explosions. Something broke apart and gouged out the earth where I used to stand on.

They were sounds of... guns?

“Ooooh, it’s really here!”

“That’s Lady Marlene for you! Her prediction was perfect!”

“Our Lady Marlene is truly amazing!”

From within the spatial distortion arrived a group of boys. They were holding guns that looked like assault rifles.

Marlene? Who? I had no idea. Anyway, they all had around 400 combat power, though considering their modern-looking equipment, the number wouldn’t reflect their real strength. And with how they fired at me so suddenly, this probably wasn’t a matter that could be peacefully resolved.

Honestly, that sort of magic gun was the worst.

As I was currently in **[Human Form]**, no matter how much magic and combat power I possessed, my durability could be no different from a human’s.

I could defend against spells with magic power, and I could dodge physical attacks with my own physical abilities, but when there were multiple people shooting at me, some bullets were going to hit sooner or later.

The bullets themselves only hurt a bit, and my wounds would heal right away, but my magic would still be reduced. The unavoidable loss was what really hurt me.

And it’d be even worse if the projectiles had some sort of secondary effect, which was why whenever I found an enemy using magical projectile weapons on the battlefield, I always prioritized them first. And then I’d be forced to wipe out the whole area with a large-scale magical attack, which not only consumed a lot of my magic, but also attracted the attention of more enemies.

Well then, how should I go about dealing with these guys? I moved back to gain distance, trying to maneuver them to where I wanted them to be, but they didn’t fall for any of my feints, instead deftly moving to corner me at the ravine’s cliff. Despite their gaudy appearance, they were surprisingly well-trained.

I sighed. Fine then. Perhaps I should use **[Causality Alteration]** to gather them up and get rid of them, even if it'd take quite a bit of magic.

I stopped moving, narrowing my eyes to take a closer look at their past. They also stopped, smirks twisting their faces.

“Hey hey, so the rabbit thinks it can deal with us.”

“How ridiculous. A demihuman dares to fight us, servants of the Sage?”

“She said we only need to leave the head, right?”

“Then give the body for me. I'd always wanted to have a *taste* of a demihuman.”

“Hmm... in which meaning?”

“Both of them.”

Man, they sure are some deviant people... well, that just meant there was no need for me to hesitate here.

I raised my arm, and they raised their guns. Bit by bit, we approached each other. My magic and their guns got ready to fire—

“Hey, my lovely bunny, did you wait for long? I, Calimero, have come!”

—*holy shit!*

There, balancing and even *posing* on top of a large withered tree, was the Idiotmaster. He unsheathed his gaudy sword, flicked his bangs, smiled with bleached-white teeth, and jumped with an over-the-top motion.

“Allez hop!”

He was dancing, flying in the air as if he'd used a spell. Sweat sprayed out behind his back, glistening like wings of light.

Both I and the group of boys could do nothing but stare, mouths wide

open in disbelief.

Calimero landed between us with a *thud!* And the ground started cracking.

““WHAAAAAaaaaa...””

The dried earth collapsed, taking everyone except me down to the screaming river at the bottom of the ravine. I'd secretly began floating the moment it happened.

“...”

Oooh, right, so since the tree's withered, its roots couldn't hold the earth together anymore.

Well, whatever... no one would miss them. I gave a prayer for their departed souls long since washed away by the raging water three hundred meters below.

For some reason, I suddenly felt like seeing Blobsy and Panda again. I decided to return to the World Tree.

...he's gotta be dead this time, right?

Chapter 62 THE CHANGING WORLD

“They’re gone...?”

In her room at the Tower of Truth, Marlene the Sage faintly frowned as she noticed the disappearance of her subordinates’

magical signals.

Whitehare, the Dark Lady, possessed some sort of power to hide her attributes from **[Identification]**.

At its most basic, **[Identification]** was a skill that made use of the identifier’s own experience and nature to analyze the information they took in through their eyes, ears, and skin, then expressed it as numbers. But that didn’t mean the user wasn’t capable of gathering more than just vague information — with the help of the skill, the number they saw was virtually the exact reflection of the target’s power.

However, humans possessed weaker senses compared to demihumans and monsters, forcing them to spend more magic to activate the skill. Furthermore, the maximum attribute number the skill could display was limited to ten times the user’s own. This was simply because the standard for measurement was based upon the user, and if there was too much of a power gap, it wouldn’t be able to accurately measure the difference. The skill user could only vaguely sense that there was

‘a lot’, like how a human lacking knowledge could never grasp the size of an ocean.

The Warrior had reported that he was unable to identify Whitehare’s abilities, but Marlene thought it very unlikely that the Dark Lady could have over ten times Gold’s power.

Any monster with such power would even stand above Catastrophe-class monsters such as normal dragons and Dark Generals. They would be the ascendant Calamity-class, and in the whole history of this world, such existences could be counted on one hand.

Calamity-class described dangerous existences that were capable of destroying several countries. Whitehare had certainly done so, but that was because she’d attacked the World Tree Saplings. It was

improbable she truly had the power to face the countries head-on.

Judging from the records of Whitehare's battles as well as the fight at the auction hall of Trestan Kingdom where she was first sighted, Marlene had concluded that it was impossible the Dark Lady could have gained power equivalent to a Hero in just a few short months.

Marlene hypothesized that the Dark Lady Whitehare was a demihuman with a special ability, similar to the human Children of God, and that she could only exert enough power to destroy a city under limited circumstances.

Either that, or there was another possibility...

"The damn demihumans are helping her."

Today, humans viewed the demihuman races as nothing more than cattle, but in the past, their magical culture had been far more developed than humans. Examples of such advanced magical races were high elves and dragonkins. Fearing the threat they posed, the human race had driven them to extinction a century ago.

Of the beastman races, only the canine and feline races still survived, as they were useful as labor for humans. According to the literature kept at the Tower of Truth, many beastman races had survived until several centuries ago, and the herbivorous races among them had possessed highly advanced magical technology.

Then Whitehare should either be a survivor from one of the extinct beastman races; or she possessed an advanced magitool left behind by the previous civilizations, perhaps by the high elves; or she had people helping her in her quest.

"If the demihumans are backing her, then I just need to deal with them first," Marlene giggled, "oh, Whitehare... I'll slaughter your comrades *everywhere*, and there won't be a thing you can do about it. Ah, but then maybe sending those boys to go alone was a bit hasty? Well, whatever. I have plenty of replacements."

Her soldiers were those who'd endured the *torture* that she called her hobby. They'd cried, they'd wailed for days and days. While most had

drawn their last breath in agony and despair, some had had their minds broken and warped. They no longer held Marlene's interest and were kept alive as guinea pigs for her experiments. They received training, and Marlene used them as obedient lab rats or as vanguard soldiers. Still, the boys she'd sent out had been getting uppity recently, so she didn't quite care whether they lived or died.

Marlene sighed. She looked at the magical signal map once more and noticed that the powerful magic signal she assumed to have been in combat with Whitehare was currently moving fast, as if being washed away to somewhere.

Marlene had been convinced the powerful signal was some sort of high-rank monster, like a chimera or a manticore. But then, was there a reason for Whitehare to have spared them?

Was her conjecture correct, that Whitehare had limitations in using her power? Or was there a reason she didn't kill the signal?

"...can't be that stupid pervert, right?"

The first time Marlene met him was when she was still in her mid-teens. It was at a dinner party at a certain country. The blond, handsome youth had greeted her with a dashing smile and said:

"How beautiful you are! Please, become my 6827th woman! Allow this Calimero to show you the meaning of true love!"

Marlene had burned that *thing* to a crisp... or attempted to, at least. As the flame spell that had engulfed him as well as a few other unfortunate nobles let up, Calimero once more showed himself from behind the obese nobles he'd used as a shield and said:

"Such passion! Come now, don't be shy, my dear!"

If the Warrior hadn't stopped her back then, the whole country would've been a scorched wasteland.

As Marlene watched the lights on the map, she began working on her "Blademaster Murder Plan" that she'd started. It was practically her hobby by now.

“Salia’s gone?” In spite of himself, Tiz asked for confirmation.

“Indeed, young master.”

He had been listening to his old butler’s report in the palace of Touze Empire. Normally, there was no need to bother the emperor with such *trifles*. Her father, the knight officer, had already moved out. This was the sort of thing where the only words Tiz needed to hear was “it has been done.”

But the problem this time was the *other* people that had disappeared at the same time.

“The problematic nobles inside our country who had been under house arrest or imprisonment, as well as the incarcerated magicians, had disappeared at the same time. Similarly, our plants in several other countries had also reported the disappearance of many dangerous characters.”

Tiz grumbled.

Every country had magicians doing dangerous experiments or nobles with threatening ideologies. Most of them simply died from an unknown sickness, but for those who, despite posing a threat to the country, also possessed useful knowledge or skills, some would be put under house arrest and convinced to direct their talents toward serving the country’s purpose.

“Who were they?”

“A researcher investigating how to control monsters, a necromancer, a researcher working on a mass-destruction spell, and a demon worshipper.”

“I see... Get the Third Knight Squadron to search for them. If they found them in our borders, execute them on the spot.

No need for capture. Just bring me their heads.”

“...understood.” The old butler bowed deeply.

Tiz released a long sigh and leaned back deeply on his lavish chair.

With Shedy going around destroying Saplings all over the world, every country were tightening security around their vicinity. This resulted in an adverse effect on their monster suppression, and the armies of the Dark Generals, the Ogre Lord and the Orc King, were getting more active.

And just as if they'd been waiting for it, the demihumans had begun attacking countries that had lost their Saplings in order to rescue their comrades in slavery. And now the dangerous characters throughout the world were vanishing at the same time, as if it's all been arranged beforehand.

The world had begun to change. The white-colored girl behind it all came to Tiz's mind. He let loose a silent whisper heard by no one else.

"Shedy... what plans do you have for this world?"

"Urgh..."

Gold the Hero had lost his home country. He no longer had a place to return to. He had turned into a machine that knew nothing but fighting, and he had left the land of humans to wander the deep forests.

He thought he could have prevented that disaster, if only he was stronger. He should have been the Hero he was supposed to be, even if he had to turn his back on the emperor that he had as a brother. If he had stayed with his comrades, if he had kept his equipment, he might have been able to keep up with the Dark General, even stopping the Dark Lady.

But nothing could change the fact that he had lost to the Troll King. In the end, he was only alive due to the whims of the Dark Lady Whitehare.

He didn't know how many days it'd been since he entered the forest.

His food supply was long gone. Still, he kept on swinging his sword, killing monsters with only the flesh and blood of animals to subsist on.

Perhaps by pushing himself to the limits, he could regain the power and the honor of a Hero. Or perhaps he was just punishing himself with the spartan training with nothing to show for it.

Then why was Gold subjecting himself with this torture?

The Dark Lady had killed the Troll King, an enemy he was no match for, in a single blow, even if it had been an ambush, and she had shown him mercy. Her words, the words of the white-colored girl, had stabbed deep into his heart.

“Funny that. To me, humans, demihumans, goblins, they’re all equally life .”

Who was he wielding his sword for?

He was doing it for the people, for the country, for his brother, for the peace of the world... so then, *whose* peace was it?

Gold let out a painful groan.

He had been swinging his sword for days on end without sleep. He had killed hundreds of monsters. His strength had run out, the light of a Hero no longer shining. Now, even monsters as weak as the fiend wolves were capable of savaging him.

No, that wasn’t quite right. The light had disappeared ever since Gold began doubting himself.

As long as a Hero held true to their conviction, the elemental of light would never abandon them, even for someone like the Blademaster. If Gold could no longer call upon the light, then the elemental must have finally given up on him.

Just as Gold finished dispatching the final fiend wolf, he collapsed, no longer having the strength to support his own weight.

No matter how much of a Hero he was, once he had lost both his blessing and his consciousness, he was defenseless. His fate would be sealed the moment a monster found him.

But he was fortunate. A hooded shadow, small as a child, was timidly getting close to him, their nervousness overcome by curiosity. A finger poked the unconscious Hero.

“...Daaaad! There’s a human passing out here!”

Their voice rang toward the depths of the forest. Their hood dropped to their back, revealing the long ears of an elf.

Chapter 63 THE CORPORATION STRIKES

The Heroes had accepted the request to subjugate the Dark Lady Whitehare from the coalition of large countries, but out of the three, the Warrior had disappeared following the destruction of his home country. For a time, the Blademaster had been pursuing the Dark Lady with his own method, but one day, he suddenly found he could no longer find her tracks. So now the man was busy traveling the world, taking into his care the noble ladies who'd lost their countries and the women who'd lost their husbands.

While the Sage had developed the spell to detect magical signals, ultimately, it could only detect the Dark Lady once she entered combat with someone else. As a result, the Sage was always forced to be reactive, unable to capture the Dark Lady. In the end, three more small countries lost their World Tree Saplings, forcing each and every human countries to strengthen their own defense even further.

The teleportation circle the Sage had invented required a magician capable of casting sixth-rank darkness spells, and so it had been purchased not by the human countries but the Temples. Adventurers were frequently sent out, but no progress was made into apprehending the Dark Lady.

The Dark Lady Whitehare was a unique enemy.

The past Dark Lords recorded in the history books and the current Dark General monsters normally led an army of subordinates, instead of acting alone.

No matter how powerful their personal strength were, alone, they would be defeated by several Heroes or Champions working together. If that wasn't enough, then they just needed to be dragged into a war of attrition and surrounded by a coalition army, and humanity would have more than a decent chance to win.

Yet Dark Lords were still feared, and the Dark Generals still hadn't been stamped out. While partly it was due to the lack of unity between the human countries, the main reason was that they were leaders of a large army of minions.

Whether it be the Trolls, the Ogres, or the Orcs, each army had tens of thousands of soldiers.

In pure numbers, the human race had more people with their total population of over a hundred million. But the Dark Generals' armies had over ninety percent of their members as combatants, and even the weakest footsoldier could put up more than a good fight against a Rank 3 adventurer. The humans had no idea how much casualty they would suffer if their armies clashed face-to-face. They had no choice but to be cautious.

Yet the Dark Lady Whitehare was fundamentally different. She always worked alone.

The strength of the current Dark Generals lay in their armies, but at the same time their advance was forced by the need to defend against low-ranked monsters. On the other hand, nobody knew where Whitehare was. She was a phantom. The city guards couldn't even slow her down if she appeared, and the Sapling would be long gone by the time the knights arrived.

Assigning high-rank adventurers and elite knights to the Sapling's defense would buy some time, but they'd lose the ability to defend against the powerful monsters in the countryside in exchange. Humanity was caught in a catch-22.

And to pour salt on the wound, the demihumans all over the world were now rising up in a resistance movement.

They were attacking the remnants of countries that had lost their Sapling — groups of humans who had remained in an effort to rebuild their homeland — and take back the demihuman labour slaves. To combat the problem, the adventurer guilds had been issuing requests to eradicate the resistance, but most of the new adventurers who had been showing up in force in the last six months had refused. The nobility of certain countries had attempted to punish these adventurers, which had only resulted in the high-rank adventurers of the country leaving the border and ultimately reducing the national power.

A group of human countries had offered a peace deal with the resistance, saying *"Let's stand together against the Dark Lady and defend world peace!"*, but the reply from the demihumans were just three words: *"Go fuck yourselves."*

Yet humanity — or more accurately, the Temples — had still not yet lost.

On the surface, the Temples were cooperating with humans, giving assistance to the Heroes, and sending adventurers all over the world to defend against the Dark Lady. While the adventurers were killing monsters throughout the lands and receiving thanks from the local, their true purpose was to serve as the Temples' eyes.

The watcher drones patrolling worldwide numbered around one hundred thousand, but not all of them had human supervision. They patrolled in an AI-determined pattern, and they only reported to the corporation once they detected a significant event.

But that wasn't enough to watch for all the signs of an appearance by the Dark Lady Whitehare, who was not only an elusive phantom but also a *cautious* one. The 4th research center had made their first move as the newly-assigned anti-Dark Lady department: their plan was to make use of the eyes of nearly three million players, then filtering everything through an AI to search for certain terms such as 'Dark Lady', 'the bunny', or 'Whitehare', in order to look for the Dark Lady.

“Wha-what’s happening?! No, nooOOOO—”

It happened when I was in the middle of conquering another small country. An adventurer party had seen me and was excitedly jumping at me, when they suddenly screamed out in confusion and stopped moving.

By bringing along my lucky charms, Blobsy and Panda, I barely suffered any more Heroic interruptions. These days, I was continuing my trick of luring monsters to attack cities as a distraction to deal with the hardened defense of the Saplings.

I also realized one other thing recently: goblinoid monsters with a certain degree of intelligence, such as the goblins themselves, were hostile to me the same way they were hostile to humans and demihumans, but other types of monsters like the beast-type or plant-type generally didn't go out of their way to attack me.

Just because I was the Dark Lady didn't mean I'd get monsters at my beck and call. I'd talked with the World Tree one more time for more information, and it turned out that the reason for the increase in monster population these last few decades, as well as the reason they'd begun to attack human settlements, was because the World Tree was creating them from manaswamps and ordering them to attack in order to free the Saplings.

This was... quite the shocking truth.

No humans would ever have thought that the culprit behind the monster attacks was the World Tree itself: the cornerstone of the world, the foundation of their livelihood, and even the target of their worship.

No wonder Blobsy and Panda got attached to me so easily.

Anyway, so I had been using the monsters as a distraction to draw out the knights so that I could invade the vulnerable city and destroy the Sapling, but then suddenly, trouble happened.

The adventurers in front of me, probably players, had stopped moving. The light of awareness faded from their eyes.

Armor of iridescence appeared out of nowhere to cover them whole, and they abruptly began charging at me with surprising agility.

[Iridescent Armor]

[Magic Point: 500/500] [Hit Point: 500/500]

[Total Combat Power: 3000]

I covered the six charging adventurers in cold mist. They slowed down but weren't frozen. They continued moving and attacked me with an iridescent spear they pulled from thin air.

I struck their armor with the magic dagger I got from Tiz last time. The blade simply broke off without anything to show for it.

A spell barrier? No, that's armor specialized against the cold. So troublesome.

"Damn it!"

But I still had a lot more total combat power. I relied on pure speed to

weave through the iridescent armors' attacks, slamming my claws into one of them.

They flew off with a metallic *clang*. Yet despite their broken neck and armor torn to pieces, they still stood up without making a single sound and once more headed toward me.

Who the hell were they?! Too damn tough!

With my power, I'd expected them to be *vaporized* by a single attack. Yet not only did they hold their shape, they were even moving. It must be the armor.

My guess was that they'd used the avatar technology to recreate a metal unique to this world, but had the players really advanced so much? And their combat power were even three times higher. Why?

I took a slow, deep breath, readying myself and taking a closer look at their movements.

There was no waste in their movements. No, that's not quite right. Their movements were somehow *different*.

The people of this world, as well as the players, relied on skills and special techniques apparently called **[Combat Arts]** as the basics for combat, which often made their movements exaggerated and showy. In comparison, these armors looked... how do I say this... plainer.

Ah, right. They were moving like soldiers of Earth. Then why did they change their style so suddenly? Why did their combat power increased so abruptly? The hint lay within their **[Identification]** info.

[Iridescent Armor]

[Magic Point: 210/210] [Hit Point: 328/500]

[Total Combat Power: 3000]

Noticing the strange decrease in magic points, I changed my tactics. I fully transformed into mist, diving into the center of their formation and turned back to human. I touched one of them directly and once again began absorbing the armor's magic power.

It broke apart into clattering pieces. The player left behind began to disperse into motes of light.

[Warrior-ish Young Man] [Race: Human

] [Adventurer]

[Magic Points (MP): 0/12] [Hit Points (HP): 0/340]

[Total Combat Power: 87]

The rest brought up their spears in caution at the sight. But they weren't so scary once I understood how to deal with them. They're just annoying.

But right at that moment, I noticed dozens of sets of iridescent armor riding on spidery-looking monsters rushing toward me from the depths of the city.

“...”

The battle with the iridescent armors took several hours, enough time for the knights to arrive. It was the first time I had to retreat without destroying the Sapling.

*

boing

“Ook.”

Back at the World Tree, Blobsy rubbed herself on my cheek, while Panda on my other shoulder patted me on the head.

“...thanks.” I said, sitting on a large root and began thinking. Ever since I was a kid, these moments of deep contemplation had been my way of protecting myself from the malice of grown-ups. It was how I had survived.

First off, I believed their drastic power increase hadn't been because of a technological advancement, but because they'd consumed a large amount of magic.

Then why hadn't they done that until now? The answer was likely to be related to the drastic change in their way of movement.

First, the premise. For a lifeform to become more powerful in this

world, they needed a large amount of mana. But just being granted the mana wouldn't work: their bodies also needed to acclimatize to it.

It was the difference between a body that had trained for years and a body doped with drugs.

...or wait, maybe that's not the right analogy? Maybe it's more like the difference in deliciousness between bread made from baking dough just after mixing and bread made from baking dough that had been allowed to rise... anyway, that's the idea.

Then probably, the militarized monster avatars that had been attacking me until now were also mainly gaining strength by training up their magic, even if they were already initialized with a certain amount of magic power.

Then I could assume that in order to create those inordinately tough armor and gaining such a drastic amount of combat power, they'd needed to consume the maximum magic points that they'd trained up and acclimatized with. The proof was that the maximum magic of that dying player had been lowered to almost nothing.

That was even less magic than a human baby living in a city, really.

In other words, the corporation was doing the rational thing and sacrificing the players to gain usable firepower, without reducing the power of their personal military that were the monster avatars.

Obviously, the players wouldn't have done it themselves. In which case the corporation must have taken control of their avatars back then.

"...I have to admit, they're decisive if nothing else."

If they'd done it to only a few, they could have waved it off as a bug and apologized and they would have been forgiven.

But the amount of iridescent armors I'd defeated was already numbering several hundreds.

If the same amount of player characters disappeared, rumors would have started up in no time at all. Weren't they worried people would leave their game?

Maybe they were soothing ruffled feathers and silencing the players

by real money. A lot of money.

But in that case, they must be thinking the future profit from killing or capturing me must be worth more than the millions of dollars' worth of profit they'd be losing.

So, that was my attempt to read into what they were doing. I probably wasn't all that far off.

But then, I'd need to think of a countermeasure.

If the iridescent armors continued to show up in large numbers, it'd be difficult to reach the Sapling. Besides, while I might have managed this time by using my absorption ability, **[Magical Defense]** still worked to lessen the effect of **[Absorption]**, so if I allowed them the time they might manage to counter that too.

Then should I strengthen my **[Absorption]** skill? How? Or perhaps I should just raise my total combat power and physically pummel them into dust... but then if they also decided to strengthen themselves, it might just turn into a futile game of cat-and-mouse.

"Hmm..."

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Archdemon Lv. 21]

☐The rabbit demon of Laplace. Trickster and guide of man's fate.

[Magic Points: 85,000/85,000] 14,000 ↑

[Total Combat Power: 93,500/93,500] 15,400 ↑

[Unique Skill: <Causality Alteration> <Cyber-Manipulation> <Absorption> <Materialization>]

[Racial Skill: <Fear> <Mist Form>]

[Simple Identification] [Human Form (Wonderful)] [Subspace Inventory]

[Dark Lady]

"...this is probably enough magic, right?"

I hadn't been able to stay for long last time. But with my current

amount of magic, plus a bit of snacking in the local area, it might just work.

“Alright. Let’s go to Earth and strike at their roots.”

Chapter 64 ONCE MORE TOWARD EARTH

Yeah. I should just go to Earth and wipe them out.

Which was all fine and good, but there were a few problems with the idea.

For one, while I'd managed to go to Earth last time by going through the World Tree, that was only because my body and soul were still there for me to possess and manifest myself.

But now, there was no longer anything there.

I had no one on Earth who loved me. There was nothing tying me there — at most, there was only the desire for vengeance against those who had betrayed me and my secret alpha tester comrades. I'd always thought this would happen one day, that I'd go to Earth after I got powerful enough to rip apart space-time and cross dimensions by myself. I also knew that it'd take me around three hundred thousand magic points. I didn't know how I knew that. I just did.

Then how would I do this? I already had the answer, as a matter of fact.

I would use No. 01's ability, **[Cyber-Manipulation]**, to once more manifest myself on Earth the way the avatar technology worked, then I would use No. 08's **[Materialization]** to incarnate myself.

But to do that, I would need a digital connection to Earth.

There were a few possibilities. The first I could think of was the player character, but I felt like that sort of connection was a bit too weak for my purpose. I once tried to use **[Cyber-Manipulation]** on one of the players I defeated to dig for more information about Earthside, but the line was too weak. I barely got anything.

Besides, even if I could go to Earth through the player connection, whoever they were would be getting a huge surprise from seeing a real bunny girl suddenly appearing in front of them. And if I lacked the materials to incarnate myself, they might just be *sacrificed*.

Man, demons sure were scary, even if I say so myself.

“So that’s why I can’t take you along this time.”

boing!

“Ook!!!”

Blobsy and Panda clung to my legs in response.

I mean, of course I wanted to bring them along if I could. They kept me sane, after all. Maybe I’d be able to if I was actually crossing dimensions myself, but what I was about to do this time was *faxing* myself to the other side, for lack of a better word. I wouldn’t even be able to bring along the stuff in my **[Inventory]** such as money, weapons, or snacks for the two, much less other living beings.

As I explained as much, Panda reluctantly gave up once he heard the part about the snacks. I wasn’t about to tell him bananas also existed on Earth.

boing-oing!

Blobsy still didn’t like it. I pleaded with her as we played for a whole half a day, and she finally acquiesced.

“Alright... I guess that’s it. Let’s go.”

I left all my stuff at the World Tree — *why did I have a troll’s loincloth in there?* — and used the World Tree network to teleport to the new Sapling near the fallen large country of Xontdix.

I picked a location somewhat farther away as my landing spot just in case, but thankfully I didn’t sense any humans around. As I quietly approached the Sapling, I saw some pitch-black unicorns — actually called bicorns, I think? — of over 2000 combat power grazing on a nearly grassy field. There was a whole herd of them. With them there, the humans probably wouldn’t be able to get close.

My eyes met with a bicorn’s. It wasn’t exactly hostile, but for some reason, it just scoffed as if disappointed... what was that all about?

I headed toward the capital of Xontdix. It had been quickly abandoned after my attack.

The fate of the other fallen countries varied. In some, the humans still remained in an attempt to rebuild their country and were fighting against the demihumans. In some, the country was claimed by the former demihuman slaves as their new home. Here though, all living beings had been frozen whole. I only saw some rats scuttling around at most.

In fact, the frozen people were still here, perhaps because my magic was still lingering. The whole place was looking incredibly dreary.

“...hmm?”

There shouldn't be anyone here, yet there was something strange in the air.

The doors of several shops had been broken in. A closer look revealed that most of them were of restaurants. Probably fiend wolves making a mess of the places, since they were strong against the cold. This was a southern country, with the climate of one ever since the Saplings were destroyed. The fiend wolves might have moved in since then. Although...

were there wolves in the south?

But more curiously, it wasn't just the restaurants that were broken in. Shops selling bottled and canned products were also ransacked... were the wolves that smart?

I did a quick search of the adventurer guild I found on the way, found a guide map, and moved toward my destination, staying silent all the while. Finally, I arrived at the Temple.

Horrid shrieks rang out. Several men and women jumped at me from the shadows.

The dissonance I felt upon entering the city had prompted me to pay more attention to any possible presence. They didn't surprise me. I calmly dismantled them with claws and sharp pin heels.

“...not players?”

They looked human, but then why were they here, and in such small numbers? Were they refugees immigrating from some other place?

Damn it, I shouldn't have done that. They'd been so disgusting I

couldn't help myself. I should have left one of them alive, or maybe identify them before I did anything.

No use crying over spilt milk, I suppose. After all, the moment they attacked was the moment the distinction between humans and wild dogs disappeared in my eyes.

I entered the Temple and saw traces of people living inside. Still recent. So they must have been doing something here, then. What were the humans doing inside one of the corporation's bases? Were they just clinging to the World Tree that they called their god? Or...

"...tsk."

Deeper inside was a strange altar. An altar by itself wasn't surprising considering this was a temple, but drawn on it was an eerie black-colored magic circle. On the circle was a pile of something that looked like rotten hearts. You couldn't make it any more suspicious even if you wanted to!

On a closer look, I noticed there were traces of magic running through the circle. I wanted to destroy it, but my abilities were way too lopsided. I had problems actually just destroying things normally. And it looked way too disgusting for me to absorb the magic power, so I just froze it for the time being.

As I moved away, however, I noticed a few sheepskin scrolls lying on the floor. I picked one up. This world had paper made from tree bark, which meant these scrolls were *old* stuff...

"...summoning the Fairy King...?"

Fairy King...? This world even had that sort of thing? The other scrolls didn't hold any information I could understand, and I couldn't bring them along anyway, so there was no use worrying about them.

More importantly, I had something to do here.

"...there it is."

In front of me were chairs and desks neatly arranged. On top of them were crystal tablets. People of this world probably wouldn't understand what they were: office desks and work PCs. They weren't

on right now due to a lack of magic power, but magic was what I could supply. Hopefully they still worked.

I touched one of the crystal tablets and gently poured magic in, and the screen lit up and began displaying text. I started up the dimensional network connection as gently and quietly as I could, so as to avoid the attention of the corporation on Earth. I began hacking the other side.

“...sooo *difficult*.”

I managed to dig into the fourth informational layer, but couldn't go any further with the skills I had. I had the ability, but not enough practice.

I supposed I couldn't dive directly there... well then, let's go somewhere easier to find.

The medical facility of a certain conglomerate had previously housed a large number of staff members, researchers, and *patients*, but a tragic *accident* several months earlier had frozen and killed everyone. The facility had been locked up ever since to preserve the scene for investigation.

clack...

“...man, still creepy as fuck.”

Hard footsteps echoed in the locked-down facility in the middle of the night. The patrolling guard expressed his displeasure in an attempt to stifle his fear, but his voice had sounded a lot louder than he intended. He winced.

“What, not used to it yet? Not like I disagree though.” His partner replied teasingly. Yet he, too, was shivering as he pointed the flashlight into the darkness. The pair of night-vision goggles he had on weren't working very well. He gave it a few knocks.

It wasn't fear that made him shiver. The guards here were all ex-mercenaries or ex-military. The corpses here might disturb them, but they didn't scare them.

Ever since the incident, this facility had been covered with an air of coldness that no amount of effort could dislodge. The corpses on the ground floor were already taken away, but countless bodies still remained underground, fixed in place by unmeltable ice, their moments of death perfectly preserved.

According to the 5th research center's investigation, this coldness was apparently caused by 'mana', a hitherto unknown form of energy. While this 'mana' was energy with high purity, it existed in no conventional form. Its purity and efficiency could change in a heartbeat depending on a living being's will.

The researchers had hypothesized that due to an extraordinarily intense will, the efficiency of the mana here had been stimulated to near the maximum limit, turning it into a sort of 'curse' that would remain for over fifty years before dispersing.

Perhaps it was the reason why there had been many reports of malfunctioning electronic equipment in this facility.

Equipment such as surveillance cameras weren't working, forcing the need to have real people patrolling the place.

"I mean, who the hell would sneak into this kinda place anyway?"

"You know why, stop being an idiot. If the mass media found this place, we're gonna be up shit creek. Really, if anyone could get in here, they might as well sign up for the special forces already."

"No kidding."

The men laughed at their own silly joke.

They weren't scared. They were still disturbed, however, as they'd known how their comrades here had died.

It hadn't been their shift that day. By the time they were called back, what greeted them were nothing but frozen faces of terror and madness. And then they'd heard the muttering of the shivering staff members.

A white bunny girl.

They'd thought it some sort of joke at first. On a whim, they had asked about the matter with the interim Deputy Director of the 7th

research center, a beauty they'd been interested in since quite a while. She immediately turned pale and told them to forget about it.

It was no accident. There was somebody behind this tragedy.

"...hey, isn't it kinda cold?"

"It's *always* cold here."

"I mean, colder than normal... there's... air moving from somewhere?"

On a normal day, the guards would still feel the cold seeping into their core after a round through the facility despite wearing cold-resistant suits, which should have been enough for them to withstand even the summit of the Alps. Yet the bitter cold just now had been *painful*, as if their exposed face had been iced over.

The cause of it was a faint breeze blowing from somewhere within the sealed facility, the men noticed. They turned their eyes.

"...there."

It was the place with the most bodies, as well as where their comrades had been executed to a man. The room with innumerable cold-storage capsules.

"Huh, nothing... wait."

A small lamp was flickering. Was the electricity still on? Inside the room... at the center of the room, a mass of white mist was slowly dancing, twisting like a gentle whirlwind of cold air.

The sight wouldn't have looked out of place *if they were outside in the Antarctic*.

The mist slowly changed shape, forming a human silhouette like those in spirit photographs from the analog age long ago.

The men gasped. In an instant, two hands appeared from the white mist to grab their faces.

"*Be quiet at night... okay?*"

A heart-meltingly *demonic* voice whispered deep inside their ears.

They couldn't even move a single finger, much less scream. The frigid air felt as if it was swallowing whole their lives.

Like a withered tree, the men's bodies visibly thinned, their skin and lips cracking. The sight in front of their forced-open eyes was that of a human taking shape as if in inverse proportion with their leaking vitality. It turned into a pure-white bunny girl.

crack...

They crumbled like dried wood. The white girl took her hands off of them, picked up the men's mobile phones and weapons, then disappeared in silence.

It was the day the white demon once again visited Earth.

Chapter 65 THE WHITE DARKNESS LURKING IN THE TOWN

In a run-down district of a certain city in a certain country on Earth, there was an old high-rise building built since the beginning of the 21st century. Its basement housed a store selling personal defense equipment. Jim, the owner, looked at the creaking door and the new customer coming in. He slightly raised an eyebrow.

The customer stayed silent. So did he.

Among the faint sound of jazz music, they looked around the shop in apparent curiosity.

A strange customer, they were. The parka was oversized on their frame, with the hood pulled low to hide their face. They had on a pair of similarly baggy army pants and boots that looked to be clothes for a grown man.

It wasn't the body size of an adult. They looked more like a boy... or perhaps actually still just a kid. In this country, people entering stores like Jim's with that sort of suspicious look were, nine times out of ten, burglars.

Jim couldn't relax, even if they were a kid. In this country, where guns were relatively easier to acquire compared to other first world countries, children could kill adults just by a pull of a finger. No one

could have fault Jim for reaching for his gun just because a customer looked suspicious.

“...”

Yet even as he touched the gun hidden behind the counter, he didn't take it into his hand. He *couldn't*.

He was assaulted by a feeling of severe uneasiness and dissonance. The customer looked thin, their height only a bit over five feet. They looked like nothing more than just a kid. But the strange unease was telling Jim that the moment he held up the gun would be the moment he took his last breath.

“So I heard this place take trade-ins, right?”

“...where did you hear it from?”

Only when the customer first talked to him did he realize that *she* wasn't a boy, nor a child. And she wasn't even an adult woman — judging from how thin she looked, she was still just a teenage girl.

“On the internet.”

The girl waved her phone in front of him as her reply.

Jim hadn't written anything about trade-ins on his shop's homepage. Since she didn't say 'website' but only 'internet', then she must have found somebody's tweet and identified this shop and its location. Concluding that she wasn't a *normal* customer, Jim lightly leaned on the counter and began to do business.

“What're you offering?”

“These.”

The girl placed the goods on the counter. Seeing them, Jim asked, “Can I take a look?”

“Go ahead,” she nodded.

“...the newest model used by the military, I see. Already broken in at that. No outside defect. I heard these are only just beginning to be issued? It should be too early for it to start showing up on black markets... where'd you get it from?”

It was the newest handgun model, made by a conglomerate in the arms and munitions industry. The girl was offering two of them. They couldn't have been acquired through any official pathway. Jim attempted a bit of intimidation, but there wasn't a single twitch on the girl's face behind the hood.

In this country, Jim's shop was only one among the numerous stores secretly doing trade-ins behind the counter. There was a yearly cycle of several of such shops being exposed and then revived in some other underground locations. It was the reason why the police had stopped bothering with them, and were generally content to leave them be unless something significant happened.

Jim was an ex-policeman. Once in a while, his old co-worker would appropriate some of the guns they'd confiscated to sell to him, which was why Jim's shop had been able to survive here for over a decade.

The girl showed no signs of being affected by Jim's intimidation. He felt a strange chill seeing the strands of white hair faintly swaying behind her hood. They reminded him of silver threads.

"You're not buying then?"

"...do you have the authentication?"

"Here. Not mine, though."

"Obviously."

The girl took out another phone in addition to the previous one and laid them on the counter.

Guns in the modern age required authentication upon use, in order to deny enemies the use of own's own weapons.

The army, the police, or similar organizations generally used scrip certificates or such items as authentication, but keeping in mind future changes or additions to the info, mobile phones were instead the mainstream type of authentication for individuals or security companies.

The phones she had must have been taken from their owner. An individual or an organization.

The guns could be unlocked just with these devices, but there was a

chance information about the location of future firearm use would be leaked to the organization who used to own them. Jim would need to transfer user authentication first.

“...alright. Six hundred bucks for each.”

“Isn’t that too cheap? I got you your authentication too.”

“That’s the kind of business we’re doing here. If you have complaints, go sell them to those shops in the front. Seven hundred each.”

“Fine. Do you have prepaid phones? Just count them into the bill. Also, any melee weapons? A knife would be fine.”

“...just wait there.”

He took one of the prepaid phones lining up in the shop and connected it to the store’s device, then went into the back and took out a slightly dusty wooden box.

Today, almost no one used coins or paper money anymore. In cities of first world countries, you needed a mobile device or your ID card to make payments. It was no inconvenience to normal people with a citizenship and a bank account, but not criminals or illegal immigrants, which was why there was still quite a bit of demand for prepaid mobile phones.

Batons and stun guns were among the goods being publicly displayed in Jim’s store, but not deadlier weapons such as knives. The girl slightly winced at the dust covering the box. She took out the combat knife, somewhat on the larger side, then nimbly gave it a few test swings.

The knife was black market goods appropriated from military supplies. It was supposed to be used by soldiers nearly 2

meters in height. In the girl’s hand, it looked more like a machete. Its grip almost looked like it wouldn’t fit, yet the girl was handling it with surprising proficiency. Jim couldn’t help but sigh in admiration.

“You’re good.”

“I had no choice. This is nice. This and this too, please.”

The girl put on the counter the large combat knife, one survival knife,

and ten cheap foldable knives.

“You don’t want guns? I have some old models that don’t require authentication.”

Times changed, but weapons stayed largely the same. Even now, handguns were still using gunpowder and firing .380 or 9mm bullets.

“Unfortunately, I haven’t had the chance to use them before,” the girl blandly said.

Jim gave a light shrug. He wasn’t looking at the girl as a kid anymore. He was treating her as one of *those* people.

“Two hundred bucks for everything.”

“Still expensive... at that price, throw in a freebie for me.”

“...wait there.” Jim readily agreed, apparently having thoughts of his own. He went into the back and took out something that looked similar to a straight sword.

“This baby’s been used by the Asian mafia... apparently. You can handle it, right?”

The girl stayed silent, taking out the sword from its black-lacquered cylindrical sheath. She stared at the single-edged blade. It looked to be quite the antique.

“...nice sword. Already drank the lives of more than a hundred.” The girl blithely said. Jim stayed silent, feeling the honesty behind her words.

She returned it to its sheath and took it. Looked like she accepted the freebie. Jim took the money, depositing the change into her prepaid phone and handed everything over.

The girl took the package and they... disappeared. Where did she hide them? Inside those baggy clothes? He supposed it wasn’t exactly impossible considering the glimpses he’d seen of her hidden depths.

She met his eyes and gave a slight nod, then turned away. As Jim watched her getting ready to leave, staying silent all the while, the entrance door suddenly slammed open.

“Hah, hahhaha! GIMME THE GUUUUNS!”

“Tsk!” Jim reached his hand for the gun behind the counter. Unfocused, cloudy eyes. The intruder was probably a drug addict.

This sort of people was honestly worse than the typical burglars. They weren’t scared of guns, nor would they ever do the logical thing and retreat. Not just that, they might not even realize they’d gotten shot, even continuing to rampage for a while. The druggie only had a kitchen knife in hand, but it was plenty lethal with modern metallurgy.

Jim aimed his handgun with both hands. And then, he saw the girl calmly walked forward.

“No, you stup-RUN!”

She *blurred*. The single-edged straight sword was out of its sheath. The druggie suddenly looked pained, collapsed into a heap, and gradually stopped moving. The girl casually walked past the body without a second glance and left the store.

The heap on the floor was certainly dead, yet Jim couldn’t find a single outside wound that would correlate with the expected cut. On a later day, according to an underground professional corpse remover, the druggie’s lungs had been slashed to bits by a sharp object, and the cause of death had been drowning in his own blood. On a hunch, Jim checked the security camera.

No girl ever entered his shop.

“I actually managed to go shopping...” I left the shop with a sigh of relief.

Ever since I left my home, I’d always been either in the hospital or the facility. I hadn’t had the pocket money to buy something ever. I only knew you could trade money for goods from the VR device of the library.

In Yggdrasia I just needed to hand over coins. I’d never done digital transactions before, so I was a bit nervous. **[Cyber-Manipulation]** should probably be able to handle my money problem if I knew how to use it that way, but since I didn’t, I had no intention to be reckless.

I continued altering the city's security camera footage as I went along to my next destination, a second-hand clothing store. I changed into something that would fit me better and snuck into the city.

Blobsy and Panda weren't here, so my rabbit ears were showing again...

So I'd managed to manifest myself on Earth, but there was no longer anything important at that sealed facility.

There were several other facilities of the corporation in this country, but indiscriminately attacking them all would be too inefficient. It'd just unnecessarily set them on high alert. Wouldn't be funny at all if they started bringing out some more weird weapons.

The information I got from **[Cyber-Manipulation]** had mentioned three names: the 7th research center, the 4th research center, and the 12th research center. One of them should be what I was looking for.

I pulled the hood of the coat I'd just bought lower to cover my eyes. I slipped through the ticket gate with my smartphone and got on the gloomy subway, empty but for only a few other people.

Chapter 66 SHADOW OF EVIL

With the demon Whitehare now heading toward Earth and ceasing her quest for the time being, Yggdrasia should have regained some measure of peace, if only temporarily. But strange incidents were happening, as if to cover for the Dark Lady's disappearance.

The soldiers keeping watch outside human towns were holding their spears in a death grip, looking inordinately tense.

Their vigilance was twitchy, jittery, as if they were terrified by something invisible.

Just a while ago, the Dark Lady had suddenly appeared and wiped out several countries in a blink of an eye, and they had certainly feared her. But as the Dark Lady Whitehare possessed no subordinates, always acting alone, the garrison soldiers in locations other than the capital, where the Sapling that was the target of Whitehare was, would at most only fear the loss of their livelihood that would result from her attack. They weren't *terrified* of her.

The large countries had jointly requested the Heroes to subjugate the Dark Lady. Current rumors had it that while the Heroes' assault seemed to be stalling, just the fact that the Heroes had begun to act was enough to put the Dark Lady on guard, turning the situation into a stalemate.

Then *what* were the guards terrified of?

"...there they come!"

"Confirmed sighting of dark pixies!"

These monsters had recently begun to appear from murky forests, from desolate graveyards, from crumbling buildings, and from rotting ruins. They were humanoid, twenty centimeters tall, with insectile wings. Their extreme similarity to the so-called 'pixies', their dark-red, enormous bloodshot eyes, reedy limbs, as well as their extreme belligerence and cruelty had all combined to earn them the name of 'dark pixies'.

These dark pixies had one day suddenly appeared all throughout the world to ravage villages and towns without discrimination, killing cattles, demihuman slaves, and citizens alike. Their elusiveness and individual strength that was above a normal soldier made them troublesome foes. Furthermore, every time they showed up, it was as a group from several up to over thirty. Splitting up soldiers into patrolling teams of several men only added to the casualty. The soldiers were forced to huddle up for a chance of survival.

“Where are the adventurers?!”

“They’re on their way, sir!”

In response, the human countries had sent a request for the adventurer guild to focus their hunting upon the dark pixies.

The guild was originally an organization set up to deal with the monsters that had begun threatening human cities in the last few decades. This sort of situation was exactly their bread-and-butter.

But no one knew where the dark pixies were coming from. They were forced to be reactive.

“Sir! The adventurers...”

“What?!”

“They had been attacked by an unknown group on the way... no one survived.”

“Impossible...”

The voice of the despairing soldier echoed in the darkness. Once more, a village was devastated.

Where were the dark pixies coming from? Who was this mysterious group working behind the scenes?

In the beginning, there had been rumors they were the Dark Lady’s subordinates. But once the mysterious group began to act, and from the testimony of the Blademaster who’d fought against the dark pixies and said “*The dark pixies don’t have her smell, so not her,*” the matter was judged unrelated to the Dark Lady.

Then what was the cause?

“Reporting, Your Majesty! The Third Knight Squadron has successfully vanquished the group hiding in the abandoned ruins!”

A knight came into his office to give the report as Tischlar, the emperor of Touze Empire, was doing paperwork. His hands stopped, and he looked up in puzzlement.

“Vanquish? Didn’t I order them to capture?”

“Y-yes,” the reporting knight paled, sweat beading on his forehead, “Our utmost apologies! Our suspects had not responded to calls of surrender and had fought to the bitter end. Even those who we’d captured had all killed themselves with poison!”

The emperor let loose a heavy sigh.

“...I see. Good job. Have you found out who they were?”

“Our suspects did not carry anything to identify them, except for the usual documents about the magic circle. We had hurried the analysts to reference them against information from all countries as fast as they can, and they had reported that the group heavily resembled Varringt’s prison escapees on the wanted list!”

“Got it. You can leave.”

The dark pixies had also been showing up in Touze Empire.

They’ve roughly determined the cause. There’d been incidents of felons escaping incarceration throughout the whole world before the Dark Lady quietened down. The knights had determined their hideout and had raided the place, and there, they had discovered an evil altar with a large number of live sacrifices, humans and demihumans both. They had also found a bizarre magic circle.

These criminals never surrendered. They would even turn themselves into sacrifices in their final moments. From the documents they left behind, it has been determined that these magic circles was related to the appearance of the dark pixies. However, their true goal was still shrouded in mystery.

“I have brought tea, young master.”

“Drop the ‘young’ already, gramp.” Tiz wryly smiled. The old butler would pamper him until the end of his life.

Tiz relaxed, smelling the fragrant tea leaves. He leaned deeply back on his chair.

“We still haven’t found her?”

“Indeed. And there are no sign her father is hiding her.”

Salia had been Tiz’s personal bodyguard before her egregious conduct caused her to be dismissed and put under house arrest. After her disappearance, attempts to track her had all ended fruitlessly.

The mad criminals that the countries had left alive by virtue of their standing and skill were now being released into the wild by an unknown party. They were plotting something foul.

“So, the ‘Fairy King’...”

Only several instances of the term appeared within the documents that had been in the possession of the prison escapists.

Some experts had said that the madmen’s goal was to summon the Fairy King. But many doubted their existence, and they believed there must be something deeper.

The Fairy King only ever appeared in children fairy-tales. There was nothing to prove their existence even in the whole history of Yggdrasia, a world with elementals and demons.

Did they really exist? If they did, then what were the madmen trying to do by summoning them? Or was it all just a distraction?

“Just Shedy’s already enough of a headache, and now this...”

The peace of this world was being threatened by many.

The monsters appearing and attacking human countries several decades ago.

The Dark Lady Whitehare’s destruction of the World Tree Saplings, and the subsequent collapses of countries.

The insurrection of demihuman slaves, a crucial source of labor.

The increased activity of Dark General armies.

And now, the summoning of dark pixies by criminal-turned-terrorists.

These were the reasons why humanity's economy, formerly prosperous, was now grinding to a halt. Problems were beginning to appear all throughout the world. The people were still managing with the endless mana from the Saplings, but if trade continued to stall and refugees continued to increase, sooner or later, it would all come tumbling down.

"The cause of the dark pixies... can't we even disclose the information about the escapists? Just them?"

"I believe it would be... inadvisable."

Among the escapists throughout the world, there were many guilty with such serious crimes they were supposed to have been already executed. The higher-ups, especially of large countries, would loathe to let the information leak to the citizens.

This was why the only people in the know, even among the knights, were the squadron leaders and above, as well as the spy agency in charge of intelligence and assassination. Consequently, they were forced to be always one step behind.

Tiz stared at the cooling cup of tea and thought.

What was happening in this world? Was there some sort of root cause behind it all?

The last time he saw Shedy's eyes, there was no trace of madness nor regrets in them. They were filled with a powerful determination. With purpose.

Tiz was thinking. Was he overlooking something? Something important, *fundamental*?

In the dimly lit subway train, my body swaying along the light vibration, I used **[Cyber-Manipulation]** on my mobile device to do some information manipulation.

They hadn't shown any sign of knowing I was here. The disappearance of those guards was simply treated as a case of missing people. Well, not like I really knew how much they realized, though.

While it was necessary for me to steal their lifeforce for my manifestation, selling their items might have been too rash. I should have just hunted for some thugs around town if I needed money. It wouldn't have left potential future troubles that way.

“ ... ”

I wryly smiled as I noticed my thoughts so easily veering in that direction. I was supposed to be a human of this world until just a while ago, and now I was already thinking of them the same way I thought of hunting deers to sell their pelt and antlers.

Was this what it meant to be a Demon?

...no, not quite. No matter what might have happened, I'd never been a *decent* person in the first place.

clack!

The door opened. A black man and a white man, both well-built, entered the subway car formerly empty of people except for me. They were laughing loudly as they walked close to me.

The white man didn't sit down, instead leaning on the subway door leading outside and looked at me, faintly whistling a catcall. I continued fiddling with my smartphone.

While my blank-white parka was hiding my face with its hood, I was wearing a denim short skirt and sneakers. My choice of clothing had simply stemmed from the thinking that people generally let their guards down to girls more than they would to boys. I'd forgotten that girls would have this sort of trouble too.

“Hey baby, what's a girl like you doing all alone on a subway? There're dangerous people around, don't you know?” One of them started talking.

“Like us, for example,” the other sniggered.

“Yeah. Hey, hang out with us for a bit. We're off our shift.”

“Scram.” I said, still looking at my smartphone. For a moment, the air seemed to have frozen still. Then it heated up with the men’s anger.

“Y-you...”

“Scram.”

I slightly raised my head. They saw my eyes up-front and visibly paled. They almost stumbled back a step.

“...tsk, let’s go.”

“Y-yeah...”

The two got their last words in and left for another car in a hurry.

...I really wished people wouldn’t force me to have to kill more than necessary. It wasn’t like I derive pleasure from killing. Although I suppose part of it was my fault, since I forgot about how I looked.

Maybe I scared them a bit too much? I knew I’d be having trouble reining in my presence, considering I didn’t have the necklace. Oh well.

I took out the ID card and used **[Cyber-Manipulation]** to read it... yep, I was right.

The card had belonged to one of the men back then. I pickpocketed them. I knew the 12th research center of that corporation was in this area, so I thought that if I was lucky, someone working there would get on the subway. I actually got a hit the first time around.

Sneaking in would be easy if I just completely transformed into mist, but then I wouldn’t be able to enter any airtight rooms, plus it wouldn’t be funny if they knew about me because I thoughtlessly destroyed the place.

...well, if I went all out I’d get found out sooner or later anyway, but I still wanted to try to get as much info as I could before then.

The train slowly came to a stop, the door opening with barely a hiss. I got on the platform, then exited the station. I walked through the town in the dead of night toward the 12th research center.

Chapter 67 FOLLOWER OF THE DARK LADY

I walked through the town of night, fiddling with the ID card I appropriated from the men in the subway.

I connected the card to my smartphone and used **[Cyber-Manipulation]** to read the info. The man was working in the material storage department. Hmmm... not quite what I was looking for. He looked muscular so I had thought he was one of the guards. If he was just a warehouse worker, there weren't going to be many places I could get in with his card.

And that wasn't my only problem. Once he noticed his ID card was gone and sent in a report, the card's going to lose all of its functions.

But I didn't think it was going to be that much of a problem. Further investigations revealed that reissuing cards would cost quite a pretty penny, and the card owner would need to go directly to the issuing office to get their card. Most people would probably go search for them first and only request card lockage once they were certain it was lost forever, right?

He just needed his mobile device to buy things, so I was thinking I'd probably have about half a day before I needed to worry about it... anyway, if things went wrong, I'd just make something up as I went along.

Besides, I could probably manage something about the card's privileges too.

“...the 12th research center.”

It was inside a fifteen-story building in a semi-industrial district some distance away from the subway station. Or to be more precise, apparently the whole building was the 12th research center.

The 12th's purpose within the corporation was to hold the developer department of the game *World of Yggdrasia*. At the very least, they seemed much more likely to be aware Yggdrasia was a real world compared to the other departments, so there was no need for me to hesitate. Not like I intended to, anyway.

“[Cyber-Manipulation]”

I checked for any patrolling watcher drones nearby. I used my Skill to look through the cameras, then weaved through their blind spots to dash into the underground parking lot. I got in.

I might be able to handle the city's cameras, but I had no confidence I could use my Skill to completely fool the cameras of a place that took security as serious as this, so I just focused on moving through their blind spots. I went around behind the guard standing alone in front of the door, who obviously looked like he'd had experience in the army. I cut his throat with a quick swipe of my knife.

Had he been a mercenary before? He was unconsciously standing in a location where he wouldn't show up on the cameras.

I moved the body to a dark spot, freezing the spilled blood and vaporizing it into dust. I couldn't use my more obvious abilities here on Earth. I didn't want to stand out, true, but mainly I just didn't want to use those abilities too much.

It wasn't like Earth had no mana at all, but compared to Yggdrasia, there was way too little of it. Back there, my **[Absorption]** allowed me to recover thirty percent of my magic each hour. Here, I could only recover a single percent after three days.

I'd already spent close to thirty thousand magic points just to come here. While I still had fifty thousand left, if I froze and demolished the entire building and then it turned out it wasn't my target, no amount of mana could last me the entire trip.

Still, if I directly absorbed people's lifeforce with my hands instead of using my cold mist, then while people here didn't have magic, their souls would still refill a tiny bit of my own magic pool.

Honestly, while I had no personal grudges with these guys, my impression of the corporation wasn't so good that I'd bother picking and choosing who to spare in a pack of beasts that had bore their fangs against me. If anything, I hadn't even a single positive emotion to associate with them. They'd understand if I didn't bother to discriminate.

I held up the ID card and the staff door opened. That was a relief. I didn't really think they would actually put up eye scanners here anyway, but I still worried a bit.

There were more cameras ahead. Before the door completely opened, I slipped into a blind spot, then removed my weight and clung to the ceiling.

Two guards came out to check the door when they saw no one on the

security monitors. Before they came into camera view, I threw my foldable knives into their foreheads, using **[Causality Alteration]** to make sure they killed them.

They made a bit of noise when they fell down, but no other guards came.

I floated my mist around a bit to check for signs of living people. There was only one person sleeping in the nap room that was in the back of the security room, so I sent them into a more permanent sleep and threw the two dead guards in there.

It had been two minutes since I infiltrated the place. Even if I'd had a bit of real combat training in Yggdrasia, considering how I was just a normal human kid in the beginning, I'd say I did pretty well.

...but there was nothing demonic about what I was doing, at all. More like a job for the special forces, or maybe an assassin.

“This place, right?”

Cutting the cameras would be too suspicious, obviously, though I did cut the alarm. I edited the camera footage just in case, but even in the small chance something still showed up on camera, it shouldn't be able to reach headquarters.

I checked the screens in the security room. Looked like the lower floors were offices, warehouses, and document storage, while the main office for the developer department and the laboratories were on the upper floors.

I threw the ID card I used into the lost-and-found bin and took an ID card from one of the guards, putting it in my pocket.

I forced the elevator doors open and climbed up the shaft. Midway through, I stopped to check for presence of people.

There was no one on the lower floors, while I sensed a few life signals on the upper floors.

From inside the elevator shaft, I used **[Cyber-Manipulation]** to check the cameras. I found a security room and a few guards on the upper floors, so I headed there first.

That was close. If I'd cut the cameras below, they'd totally be on alert by now.

From where the cameras were placed, I wasn't sure if I could get there without being seen. So I used Cyber-Manipulation to force static into the monitors for a single moment and used the chance to dash inside the security room.

"Wha-where'd you-"

I threw the machete-ish combat knife at the one who noticed me first. It stabbed into his face, killing him instantly.

Another guard ran for the alarm, while the remaining two reached for the guns on their hips.

"Fuck-argh!"

Just as one of them was about to raise his voice, I crouched and swiped his legs out with my own, while my hand threw three foldable knives toward the head of the young man running for the alarm. Before I could see the result of my throw, I slammed my elbow into the throat of the man I tripped, crushing his windpipe.

"Who the he-!!!"

As the final man aimed his gun, I cut off his hand with my straight sword and stabbed his throat before he could scream.

The man trying to ring the alarm was already dead, my three knives stuck in the back of his head.

It would have been simpler if I just froze them with my mist, but then they might realize it was me. So I'd used weapons, just in case.

I took back my knives, freezing the blood and fat on them and wiped them off. I cut the alarm and headed for the server room for the MMORPG *World of Yggdrasia*.

"Hmmm..."

I used Cyber-Manipulation on one of the servers. It held nothing but player data.

I was quite certain this was where they did the overall management of

the players they were sending to Yggdrasia, but there was no sign of anything resembling the all-important monster avatars.

I was sure they were being sent from here. Perhaps this was just a layover spot, and the main system of the militarized avatars were somewhere else?

There was a more fundamental question here. While this was a building with a whole fifteen floors, was a facility of this size even enough to bridge the gap between dimensions? What if the dimensional-crossing system were also set up in the other locations on my list of suspects, the 4th and the 7th research centers?

In which case, perhaps this facility really was only used for connecting the game to the other world. What should I do...

“Maybe I should just destroy it.”

I looked at the supercomputer that took up a whole floor in front of me, wondering how I'd do this. Then my rabbit ears picked up a faint noise.

“Mmm? Is somebody there?”

It was the sleepy voice of a woman. I knew there were other people beside the guards on the upper floors, but I'd left them alone, thinking them to be harmless since they were just doing their job.

The habits from when I used to be a human drove me to an unwitting sigh, despite my lack of need for respiration.

Fine then. If I was discovered, then I had no choice. There was a bit of distance between us, and I didn't want to waste more magic than necessary, so I slightly released the lid on my presence and quietly turned around.

The woman held not a single bit of wariness at the sight of me, looking like a high-school girl in a white parka and denim short skirt, even if she was feeling somewhat suspicious. Then the little bit of presence I released took her by surprise. She gasped, her face twitching fiercely.

I pulled my guardless straight sword, its length about 40 centimeters, from its black-lacquered scabbard. I silently closed our distance. The redhead woman, who looked to be in her mid-twenties and was

wearing a white lab coat and a pair of glasses, was shocked silent. She sank to the floor, apparently too scared to even stand.

Thank you. You're a nice person. You didn't scream or run. Saved me a bit of magic.

I looked down on her and put on a smile. Her eyes were opening so wide they looked like they'd fall out at any moment.

"...the Dark Bunny Lady...?"

"...what?"

The hell is that? I knew I was called the Dark Lady, but *Dark Bunny Lady*? What were they thinking?

Her words were so out of left field I couldn't help but stare at her face. The rabbit ears behind my head slipped out of the hood a bit. The woman *beamed*.

"Aaaahh, it's really you! I can't believe I'm actually meeting the Lady Bunny here! This is the best day of my life! Do you know I've filled my room with posters of you so that you'd bless me with your visage every day—ow that's cold!"

I blew a bit of mist at her, interrupting her impassioned word vomit. She shivered as if someone had just poured ice water on her.

"Explain."

"Y-yes..."

Her name was Jennifer. She wasn't exactly a researcher of the 12th research center, but rather one of the people managing the game.

Jennifer had also personally joined the MMORPG *World of Yggdrasia* as a player. She knew about how the other world was real, and how I had come back to Earth and killed a facility's staff members.

But she still loved the idea of a real-life Dark Lady. Apparently she'd bought every single kind of promotional goods related to me.

She was also the person who'd developed the backdoor program to log into Yggdrasia. She'd been gathering similarly-minded people who

used monster avatars and finding a way to contact me. She pleaded with me not to destroy this facility since they were only working on the game and nothing else, and if the place was gone, she wouldn't be able to join the game anymore.

"I see... any other last words?"

"W-waitwaitwaitwaitpleasewait! I can be useful to you, my Lady, even here or on the other side too! You have something to do here, right?! I'll help!"

Jennifer stared at me with sparkling eyes. I scowled, but took some time to think.

True, if I had someone aware of the inner workings of the corporation to help, it'd save me some unnecessary trouble. But if an employee went missing on the day right after such a huge mess, they might be able to follow me by tracking her.

Oh well, I could just erase her if she turned out to be more trouble than she was worth.

"They might suspect you, you know?"

"It's fine! It's already time for me to leave work today, and I'll be taking a vacation starting from tomorrow! If anything happens, I'll tell them I got kidnapped by the Dark Lady!"

"Umm... right..."

I didn't think the corporation was that naive anyway, but well, if she's willing.

After that, after Jennifer finished her weird performance in the security room devoid of any other people and clocked out for the day, we left for the underground parking lot and got into her second-hand car. The two of us headed for my next destination: the 4th research center.

Chapter 68 INFILTRATING THE 4TH RESEARCH CENTER

The electric car of the researcher Jennifer, self-proclaimed Dark Lady worshipper, carried the two of us onto the highway in the suburbs. It was an old vehicle, paint discolored with age.

“It’s a Japanese car from quite some time ago. I’ve driven it over five hundred thousand kilometers and it’s almost never given me trouble!”

“Mmhmm.”

I didn’t really get it. It’s probably supposed to be amazing.

Anyway, just getting a mean of transportation was honestly helpful. I could move faster by myself, except I’d be spending magic power for high-speed movement when I needed to be saving as much as I could.

Which reminded me, this might actually be the first time I rode on a car. The last time had been the truck carrying me from the hospital to the facility. It was closer to a *prisoner transport* than a ride. It didn’t count.

I rested my elbow on the open window frame and leaned on it. I closed my eyes, feeling the wind on my cheeks, careful to keep the hood where it was.

When was the last time I could relax like this, I wondered...

“It’s a great day for a drive! You think so too right, my Lady? Ah, should I put on some music? There’s this alternative rock band I can recommend—eep!”

My good mood ruined, I shut her up with a blast of coldness. The car skidded left and right for a moment.

“Quiet down...”

“I-I’m sorry... my Dark Bunny Lady looked so much like a normal girl I sort of just...”

What the hell was with that title? As I glared at her in exasperation, a sports car revved its engine to overtake us from behind, paying no attention to the speed limit. As they passed us by, so close they grazed our car’s side mirror and my elbow, a voice rang out.

“Fucking slowpoke geriatric, get that fucking scrap heap off the fucking road!”

I looked at Jennifer and answered her.

“You really think so?”

“...eh?”

I snapped my finger. The sports car that overtook us began to zigzag, one of its tires now burst. It veered off the highway and plunged into the empty fields.

“...did ... my Lady did that?”

Jennifer’s face blanched a smidgen. Maybe I scared her a bit too much?

“...call me Shedy.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t call me the Dark Lady, people are going to *look*.”

Jennifer’s pale face visibly began to redden.

“Yes, Shedy! I’ll help you as best I can! Please give me an autograph later!”

Maybe I should stop being so nice.

*

“Sorry for the wait, Shedy!”

I didn’t need to eat or sleep, but humans needed their meals and bathroom breaks.

Which was why we were currently parked at the burger chain with the large M symbol that had stores open even in Antarctica and the Saharas. Jennifer came back to the car with a large paper bag.

“Is this fine, Shedy?”

She gave me some Coke in what might as well be a bucket, as well as a huge burger.

“...what’s this?”

“A normal Coke and cheeseburger! Oh, here, there’s some fries too.”

So this is the *normal* size... I’d lost my chance to refuse. I stared at the *thing* in my hand, my mind wandering.

I used to have to pretend to eat and store the food in my **[Inventory]**, but ever since my Humanoid Form turned into Human Form, I'd gained the ability to eat if I wanted to.

I actually had tried eating. I first bought it for Blobsy, but since she preferred monster meat, the salted herring sandwich had been languishing in my **[Inventory]** all this time. I'd tried a bite, but it just felt like eating papier-mache.

I didn't know if I'd lost the ability to eat normal food when I became a demon, or if the food was just terrible, but I'd learned to not leave a single scrap of food behind for survival reasons since a long time ago. So I'd still finished it. I'd honestly thought that defeating and absorbing living beings would still be a lot more satisfying than eating that.

Which was why I wanted to bow out this time too, but on the other hand, I'd never had a hamburger before. I took a tiny bite.

I stared at the thing in my hand, then took another bite.

"Did you like it?! That's one of our national comfort food!"

For some reason, Jennifer drew close to me with a beaming smile. I pushed her face off and frostily glared at her.

"Explain where we're going to next."

"...yesh, ma'am."

...that reminded me, there was this thing where demon worshippers gave "offerings" to their demons, right?

Our next destination was the 4th research center. Just as I'd suspected, the 4th and the 7th were doing research about the other world. Both of them were set up with the dimensional-crossing system.

According to Jennifer, the 7th were working on the growth-capable normal avatars and researching mana, while the 4th was doing work on the magical weapons and militarized monster avatars.

"What about that thing that monsterize players?"

"Aaahh... that. Yeah, that's some crazy stuff. The players would get

their game suddenly shut down and their character data deleted, they'd get their arms twisted by HQ and the 4th, and only the 12th is left to deal with their complaints. Don't you think that's terrible? Of course, as a player myself, I'd be raising hell too if I ever got my character deleted out of nowhere."

The 4th research center was doing that too? Apparently the military stuff used to be worked on by the 7th, and the recent reckless attacks on me had begun ever since the weapon development project was transferred to the 4th.

Which meant that first facility where I'd gone all out had been managed by the 7th. I'd flatten the 4th too, of course, but the 7th was the one that I'd *promised* to visit since way back then.

I narrowed my eyes at the thought. Jennifer in her driver's seat timidly talked.

"Umm... Shedy, are you okay with a motel's frozen pizza for tonight's dinner?"

"..."

Three days later, in the evening. We'd crossed states and arrived at the 4th research center located in the suburbs.

"But Shedy, we're still quite far away."

"We are."

Seen from the highway, the enormous site of the 4th research center was still in the distance.

There were barely any trees around it, only sand and rocks. Other than the 4th, there were only a few drive-ins, gas stands, motels, and trailer homes. If we got any closer, we might invite some unwanted attention.

"It's fine, just wait here."

"B-but-" Jennifer sputtered, apparently misunderstanding that I no longer needed her. I scowled at her.

“If you die here, I’ll lose a driver. Just stay there.”

“...yes, ma’am!”

I dashed toward the 4th research center while trying to stay hidden behind the rocks and boulders.

Not much security. With the 12th having all its guards dying from an ‘accident’ (which just meant it wasn’t being reported), this place had ramped up its security by quite a bit, yes, but it wasn’t security against me, a *demon*.

A quick glance revealed to me nearly a hundred watcher drones equipped with simple taser guns flying around the vicinity of the compound.

On Earth, where they couldn’t use mana, the drones were being powered by wireless electricity. The farther they went from the wireless charger, the less efficient the charging would be. The number of drones they could field 24/7 truly showed the resources they had as a large enterprise.

And my eyes even revealed stealth drones. They were more power-hungry than normal ones, yet there were at least the same amount of them as normal drones, perhaps even more.

But it still wasn’t enough precaution for *me*.

In Yggdrasia, they were deploying at least dozens of times more drones at locations where they predicted me to appear.

To be honest, even AI-driven watcher drones were actually a pretty good way to see me.

While I’d gotten used to **[Cyber-Manipulation]** by now and could disappear from the vision of several drones, if there were hundreds of them watching me, the corporation might be able to realize the unnatural space from comparing all the camera viewpoints.

The human perception was really good at latching onto that sort of abnormality. It was the reason why while I could erase myself from the cameras, I still did my best to not show up on them in the first place.

But here? They didn’t have enough drones, and they had *too many*

drones.

Just a hundred wasn't enough for the AI to recognize the abnormality. At the same time, there was a whole hundred drones — they didn't have enough real humans to watch every single one.

Of course, that didn't mean I could afford to be careless. Another one of my worries was coming into direct human sight.

But the corporation was so paranoid about industrial espionage, this compound didn't even have a single window.

Anyway, to deal with both at the same time, I searched for what were probably buried power lines that fed power to the wireless chargers, then used them as a medium to hack the indoor power generator and lowered its output to the minimum.

As the sky began to darken, the lights of the distant 4th research center compound dimmed, if only barely.

At the same time, all the drones began to move slower. Did they change into power-saving mode? I'd thought they would change to the state's power supply if they still can't find out the cause after enough time had passed, though they seemed the prideful sort. Would they actually do so?

With the drone security network now weakened, I slipped through them under the cover of night. I jumped over the five-meter high wire fence, not a single part of me touching it, and entered the compound of the 4th research center.

Chapter 69 THE GHOST

“Power down to 12%. No estimation until restoration.”

“Watcher drone efficiency down to 34%. Deputy Director, at this rate we wouldn’t be able to maintain stealth. Our indoor equipment are likely to be affected soon.”

Reports from staff members arrived one after another. Jace, the Deputy Director of the 4th research center, glowered and spat out his orders.

“Cease everything in the Experiments building except for currently running experiments. Reduce operation of the indoor environmental control system to 40%, then move the free power over to the security system. Leave the normal drones alone but order the stealth type to stay still. We’ll use them as fixed cameras... you shouldn’t be needing me to tell you all this.”

“Y-yes, sir...”

Damn incompetents, Jace grumbled with an imaginary tongue click as his orders sent the staff members running around in a hurry.

But his evaluation was an uncharitable one. The staff here all had the skill and experience to be hired as employees in a top-class corporation. They’d thought of one or two solutions to the problem of their own.

Jace was just the typical genius. He believed his thinking was superior, perfect. He rejected any ideas that ran contrary to his own. His constant displeasure and dictatorship tendencies had discouraged the staff members from voicing their thoughts.

“What about her?”

“Y-yes, sir, she hasn’t moved after parking at the drive-in... should we deploy a team?”

“Not necessary yet. Track her if she attempts to connect somewhere.”

Several days earlier, an incident had happened in the 12th research

center. All of its guards were slaughtered.

Reports had mentioned the culprit hadn't used a single gun, only bladed weapons. Considering the fact that they'd managed to slip through the powerful monitoring system that was even capable of detecting active camouflage, the culprit was suspected to be special forces from another company of a certain country with industrial espionage being their goal, but at the same time, the lack of tracks left behind had also given rise to the probability that it was done by an internal employee. The corporation had declared what was practically martial law.

The culprit had been nicknamed the Ghost for the lack of tracks they'd left behind. In a normal investigation, all people involved would have been questioned, but the first to discover the crime scene had been the janitor, and the employees weren't even aware anything had happened until after the corpses were cleaned up. So the staff were ordered to continue working as normal, except everyone was now under surveillance, including those who had been absent from work.

The investigation department, who were doing 'marketing research' to those employees not in the know, had reported that a female staff member of the 12th research center who had been on a vacation was heading for this place, the 4th research center.

Her name was Jennifer Caride, 26 years old. She had been scouted as an expert in electronics. With her background of being a game hacker, she was put into the game development team for the MMORPG *World of Yggdrasia* at the 12th research center.

The development team was subject to continuous network surveillance. Reports showed there was nothing suspicious in her family background or her private life.

But normally, her vacation was always for gaming. Why would she come here? This region had nothing of note. And right after the incident too, at that.

Most of the development team hadn't been informed that the stage set behind the game was a real world, except for a small number of staff members who were closely watched, with even a part of their private life under careful management.

But while Jennifer was young, she'd been a famous hacker since her

student years. Then perhaps something had piqued her curiosity, prompting her to look through the information about the staff members and helped her realize the truth?

In his wariness, Jace had looked into Jennifer. He found out she had been frequenting a fan website of the game, but the members of the site had included royalty of a certain country, famous doctors, and celebrities. Even Jace found the place too dangerous to infiltrate.

He didn't have any concrete evidence, but his suspicions toward Jennifer only deepened.

She was more than likely to be related to the murders in some way. Jace decided to observe her on his own instead of telling the investigation department his thoughts.

And at the same time she appeared, the 4th research center's power level suddenly dropped.

He was certain. Jennifer was somehow related to the Ghost. Yet she hadn't access any website ever since she'd taken her vacation, the highway cameras only showed her driving alone, and there was nothing else suspicious about her aside the more-than-usual amount of food she was getting.

"... wait... what's this..."

"...me too... weird..."

"...where'd they go..."

"No mutterings! What happened?" Jace shouted, irritated by the whisperings of the staff members. He had moved to the monitoring room to better give his orders to the whole facility.

"Yes, sir, umm..." "We can't see anyone in the fifth section!" "Same with the third!"

"What the hell?!" Jace leaned forward at the unexpected report. "What happened?! Confirm the situation with the sixth section!"

"Deputy Director, we can't contact the sixth!"

"Out of the way!"

Jace pushed aside the staff member to peer at the terminal screen. It displayed the image of a room now dark due to the power having been rerouted to the security system. There was no one there, as though it was a holiday or late night when they'd all gone home.

“...get the guards there. Some watcher drones too!”

“Y-yes sir!”

The staff worked the terminal, ordering several drones to move to the area now devoid of people.

The images captured from the drones' cameras were being transmitted to the terminal screens and digitally cleaned up to be brighter for easier viewing, yet for some reason, the on-screen footage was still far too dark.

“What the hell is going on?!”

“I-I don't know, sir.”

While Jace questioned his staff, the drones continued to show empty rooms one after another. One of the drones detected a slight thermal signature inside a garbage container in the section that had been experimenting with the newest model of the magic gun. It peered inside.

One of the young staff members gulped, his face green, palm holding in his nausea. A woman screamed.

The screen showed a container packed *tight* with bodies, their throats all torn off. The image only lasted an instant before it was snuffed out.

The whole room was quiet, their minds blank upon witnessing a sight that looked as if it was taken wholesale from a horror movie. Then someone whispered, breaking the silence.

“...*the Ghost...*”

All in the room blanched at the possibility.

The serial murderer that had slaughtered all the security guards in a single night without leaving a trace was here.

“...call back the secret beta testers...”

“...sir?”

“Call the secret beta testers back from Yggdrasia, now!”

The staff were shocked by his order. An older staff member spoke, sounding almost panicked.

“Deputy Director! Do you plan on having the soldiers they lent us to deal with the problem?! That’s a breach of contract!

You’re jeopardizing our relationship with the military-”

“Contract?! We’re having bigger problems here!”

“B-but, sir, we don’t have many weapons here for them to use. We don’t have enough of the experimental magic weapons either, and using mana required the Director’s approval...”

“The hell can that damn *politician* do now?! We’re not using the magic weapons!”

“Then-” The staff member cut himself off upon his realization. His face lost all colors.

“We’re using the militarized monster avatars!” Jace growled.

*

Several minutes after the recall order, the secret beta testers who had been raising their levels in Yggdrasia returned.

Currently, there were three experimental types of militarized monster avatars that were usable.

[MO-11-B] [Militarized Monster Avatar] [Experimental Spider-Type]

[Magic Points: 700/700] [Hit Points: 1000/1000]

[Total Combat Power: 2200]

[MO-14-B] [Militarized Monster Avatar] [Experimental Ogre-Type]

[**Magic Points:** 500/500] [**Hit Points:** 700/700]

[**Total Combat Power:** 1800]

[**MO-13-B**] [**Militarized Monster Avatar**] [**Test Iridescent Armor**]

[**Magic Points:** 500/500] [**Hit Points:** 500/500]

[**Total Combat Power:** 3000]

The last [**Iridescent Armor**] type of militarized avatar was created for the purpose of taking over player characters in order to gain high firepower, which was why it couldn't be used on Earth. In terms of overall power, the [**Spider-Type**] was the most stable, with speed and mobility better than a light tank, plus firepower and armor equivalent to a heavy tank. But as the battle was going to happen indoor, the [**Ogre-Type**] was chosen instead for their humanoid shape.

They were currently being rapidly charged with mana.

The company of on-loan soldiers accepted Jace's request. Their commanding officer was having a meeting with the three platoon leaders in VR.

According to the information they'd received, the special operative nicknamed Ghost was attacking this location, the 4th research center.

The order they'd received from the government and the army generals to be here was a top-secret one. There were many, many restrictions on what they were allowed to do. Themselves moving out to deal with just a simple terrorist was liable to be a violation of military regulations, and this was why the platoon leaders had wanted to refuse. However, the company leader thought this was a chance.

Magical weapons such as small arms were already beginning to be deployed on test runs on Earth, but militarized monster avatars still hadn't been used here. The military wanted them to be available for live combat as soon as possible, and their company was afforded some amount of discretion in order to hasten the process.

If they could get some results here, the corporation would find it a lot more difficult to refuse to supply the military with the monster avatars.

And finally,

“Isn’t it about time we try our hand at fighting humans?”

They had been killing monsters and raising their level in Yggdrasia, but soldiers were originally created to fight other humans. They had killed demihumans and refugees before in order to silence eyewitnesses, but that wasn’t a fight. That was just shooting turkeys on the loose. They had some pent-up frustration of their own.

“Alright, we’re doing this. Our mission is to eliminate the Ghost that had infiltrated the 4th research center. We’ll be equipped with the MO-14-B model. Tell those mercenary fossils in the guards to stay back.”

“””Yes, sir!”””

*

“The security guards’ signals have ceased transmitting. Sending drones to confirm ASAP!” “We’ve lost drone number 038, 039, 045, 046!”

“What the hell’s happening?! Where are the secret beta testers?!”

“All the MO-14-B have moved out... I think.”

“You *think*?!”

“...t-the soldiers don’t seem to be planning on telling us their locations. We can’t detect them!”

“Fucking military bastards...!”

“We can’t contact the researchers in the eighth section!”

“WHAT?!”

They had an invisible terrorist, the soldiers weren’t cooperating, and their researchers were still being killed. Jace couldn’t *see* anything. He moved to put on his personal VR set even as he was ripping his own hair out in his frustration.

“Give me a drone! I’ll go see myself!”

Through an audiovisual-only VR system, Jace drove a watcher drone to explore the facility interior.

Unsurprisingly, the digitally-processed camera footage continued to stay dark even through the VR connection. Only faint red exit lights and white emergency lights kept the hallways from being pitch-black.

It was quiet. Scarily quiet. Like an abandoned building devoid of all life.

Just as the thought passed through his mind, his body shivered as if in the cold. His sense of touch wasn't even connected to VR.

He came to the lockers without particularly looking for anything, and what he saw sent him squeaking. Crammed between the lockers was a *thing* that used to be human, their blank eyes staring into him.

The corpse's clothes marked him as an ex-mercenary in the security team. It was likely he had been killed without even a chance of retaliation, and his body was then placed there. But he wasn't the only victim. In the dark room, another human body was huddling into a large decorative plant. The corpse looked like it was *glued* there, twisted and bent.

Jace barely managed to clamp down on his scream.

Fucking hell, what the fuck were the secret beta testers doing, he thought, trying to ignore his fear by channeling it into anger toward the soldiers.

There were fifty Ogre-type avatars moving out. They couldn't be this quiet. Had they immediately met with the Ghost upon activating their avatars? They were capable of acting covertly, but unlike the other mana-filled world, their active time was limited on Earth. They shouldn't be able to afford to move so slowly.

With that in mind, Jace drove the watcher drone to the section where the soldiers were. As always, silence reigned. There wasn't even a single sign of battle.

Anger smoldered in Jace, anger toward the soldiers. As he headed for the VR room where they were supposed to be, he noticed the door was ajar.

Did something happen...? The door to this room was supposed to be heavily locked down. If it was open, then had they already defeated the Ghost and disconnected from VR?

“Have the secret beta testers contacted us?”

“...no...sti...ing...”

There seemed to be some sort of noise. He couldn't hear the operator's voice very clearly.

Yet standing still wouldn't solve anything, and so Jace decided to peek inside through the door gap. He saw the VR

capsules still closed in the darkness, so he knew they were still connected.

But something was strange. The soldiers inside the capsules looked different from what he remembered.

Had they always been so thin? So small?

He zoomed the camera in. He whimpered.

The soldiers inside the capsule were all dead. Withered and frozen in ice.

White-colored wind began dancing. A white mist covered the top of the row of capsules, coalescing into a human shape, an arm reaching out toward Jace to crush *something* in its hand.

At 30 years old, Jace once dropped the chemical he was holding during an experiment. Now his arms were burnt.

At 25 years old, his chair once broke and injured his hips. Now his bones were crushed.

At 18 years old, he once injured a rib from a football tackle. Now his lungs collapsed.

At 12 years old, he once got beaten by his father as punishment for his mischief. Now his jaw was cracked.

At 1 year old, his family once met with an accident in a car that had resulted in his mother suffering a whiplash. Now his neck was broken.

“And... that’s it.”

I used **[Cyber-Manipulation]** on the air-gapped mainframe computer dedicated to research and deleted everything related to monster avatars and magical weapons.

I had wondered how I would deal with the mana weaponry and equipment that were currently being experimented, but then I found the mana storage tank, so I just used all of it to smash everything to smithereens.

Such a pity. It was the first chance I had to refill my magic, and then I spent a ton of it to destroy everything. Back to scrimping mana once again...

I fiddled with the dog tag I lifted from the secret beta testers.

I had wondered how they could move so precisely, so exact. Turned out they were actual soldiers. Then did the government also have a hand in this? I wanted to deal with them too, but I didn’t have that much time. After I was done with everything, maybe.

Well then... next, the 7th research center.

Chapter 70 THE WOUNDED HERO

The western region of the Central Continent held a large country, Seize Kingdom. To the west of the country was a vast forest. Hidden in the greens was a village of demihumans, its people mainly composed of former citizens of the elven country that had been eradicated by the humans.

“Heeey, Gold, ya mind lendin’ me a hand?” said a middle-aged elf who, despite his age, only still looked in his late thirties.

“Yeah, I’m coming,” replied a large man working on the fields. He laid down his hoe, taking the hand-sewn handkerchief on his shoulder to wipe off his sweat.

“Sorry for botherin’ ya. Howsit? Ya used to field work yet?”

“...it’s not bad,” Gold hesitantly replied. The elven man broke into a gentle smile.

“Right, that one. Can ya do something?”

“Leave it to me.”

The elf was pointing to a large boulder on a field that was half-way sunken in the ground. With their mastery of elemental magic, the elves would normally simply ask the earth elementals to bury, dismantle, or deal with it however they saw fit, but apparently there was quite a bit of iron in this boulder. Iron had a binding effect upon the elementals, so they were loathe to get close to it.

With a grunt of effort, magic coursing through Gold’s bulging muscles, he lifted the boulder that must have been at least 500 kilograms onto his shoulders.

“Where should I put this?”

“Whoa-umm,” the elf stumbled over his words in astonishment — he’d asked Gold to deal with it, he just didn’t think the man would actually pick it up, “the old dwarf said he wanted some iron, so just put it near the village. He’ll probably come by to break it up later.”

“Got it.”

Gold nodded and started walking. The ground *heaved* with his every step. The children playing nearby timidly approached him.

“...watch out, it’s dangerous.”

The kids stayed silent.

Gold put down the large boulder at the edge of the village, sending a *thud* reverberating through the earth. From the group of children taking nervous peeks of him from afar, a young elven boy jumped out toward him with a beaming smile.

“Mister!”

“Yol...”

Gold put on a clumsy smile and gently patted his head.

Two months earlier, Gold had fought as a Hero to protect his motherland, the Caliphate of Torrann, against the invasion of a Dark General, the Troll King, and his army. But just as he was heading for the battle, the country’s protective barrier was suddenly broken by a plot of Whitehare, the Dark Lady who had been wreaking havoc all over the world. With the barrier gone, only ruin awaited the Torrann Caliphate.

Gold had been locked in single combat with the Dark General at the time. He had lost, overwhelmed by the Troll King, and just as death stared him in the face, he was saved by a *whim* of the Dark Lady Whitehare.

The Dark Lady had said that it was a reward for his self-sacrificing attempt to save a kid and let him go.

Gold had asked her why. She said she didn’t see any difference between the life of a human and the life of a goblin as if in mockery of him, the man who’d left a demihuman slave to die.

He had felt that her words were those of a *Dark Lady* who only thought of human lives as nothing more than so much dust. But Gold also felt the cold gaze of disdain she had for him, and he began to doubt. *Who* was he fighting for?

When a crisis threatened the world, Heroes were born to save it.

But *whose* world was it?

In Yggdrasia of the present day, the human race had seized all the Saplings and had used their magic power to dominate the whole world. Gold's 'world' had been the ninety-nine human countries surrounding the Saplings.

To humans, demihumans were useful cattle. To humans, goblins and orcs were useless pests. It had been the common perception of humans, and Gold had been taught it as the natural order.

Yet a single sentence of the Dark Lady had driven a crack into his worldview.

Gold had left on a journey to retrain himself, to eliminate his weakness, and to find an answer.

He had dove into the deep forest with nothing but scraps of food, his weapon, and his armor. He fought with all that attacked him. He strove to know everything about them.

But no answer was forthcoming. Hunger and fatigue had driven him to unconsciousness, and his savior was a small elven boy who had come to gather inside the woods.

Currently, the demihuman races and the human race were on two sides of a conflict. The humans had relied on their militaristic might to oppress and turn demihumans into their slaves, yet the Dark Lady had upended the power balance just by her lonesome.

All the same, as a *person*, the boy's father could not have left Gold to die. He had taken him to the hidden village, and Gold was allowed to stay and recuperate under heavy surveillance.

Gold woke up, and what awaited him were gazes of wariness and disdain of the demihuman villagers. Then the twin princess and prince of the fallen elven country came to meet him. They stared at him and traded only a few words before saying, "Stay however long you like," and left.

Ever since Gold returned to consciousness, Yol, the elven boy that had been his savior, began to visit him frequently.

The boy held no hatred or prejudice against the human race, only

curiosity. He asked Gold about many things, and in return the boy told him about every single thing happening in the village, the forest, as well as the White Spirit he'd once met before.

Gold was bewildered. He only ever saw demihuman children either prostrating in fear, or glaring at him with gnashing teeth as soon as they saw him.

But Yol was no different from the human children living in the countryside.

He'd talked to Yol's father. The long-lived man had displayed astonishing wisdom. If the decadent nobility of his country, men and women who'd drowned themselves in their desires, were 'humanity', then what would that make the elven man?

Gold had had a heart-to-heart talk with Yol's parents. The couple had advised him to try helping out the village with the fields.

It was the first time he'd done any farmwork. His meals were humble, nothing but fruits and potatoes. Yet the moment he saw the buds sprouting from seeds he'd planted on the dirt with his bare hands, he thought it was the first time in his life he ever felt something close to fulfillment.

Seeing Gold and his sincere work, the villagers slowly came to accept him.

He woke up in the morning with them and worked until sunset as they did. In the evening, he shared drinks of fermented milk with the village elders.

And today, as Gold was patting Yol's head, the elven, dwarven, and beastman children approached, clinging to the heavyset man.

"...mm."

A little cat-eared girl around three of age stretched out her tiny arms, looking up at him.

It took Gold a few seconds to understand what she wanted. He effortlessly picked her up and gave her a ride on his shoulders. She squealed in delight, and the other children scrambled to climb onto him. He let them, trying his best to not drop them from his arms and

shoulders... and he began to wonder how he could even take a step.

Then a voice called at him from afar, delivering him from his predicament.

“Heeey, Gooold! The princess is calling for yooouuu!”

*

“Sir Hero, have you gotten used to life here?” asked the princess of the lost kingdom.

“...yes, by your grace.” Gold tersely replied, slightly bowing as he stood on a rug of animal skin. Of the elven twin, it seemed the girl was the older sister. The brother next to her continued his silence.

They were in a shabby log cabin, its slightly-larger size the only thing to distinguish itself from the other village buildings.

Gold knew it was the humans who had robbed the villagers of their families. He turned his eyes slightly to the side, unable to bear the princess’ gaze, and he noticed a wooden sculpture of a person with rabbit ears. The princess saw his look. She faintly narrowed her eyes, twitching the barest of a smile.

“Have you realized, then? All of us pray upon the Dark Lady.”

“...is it because... she’s the Dark Lady, milady?”

Were the demihumans, those not of the human race, aiding her because she was the Dark Lady, the lord of monsters? The thoughts behind his words went unsaid, but they reached the princess all the same. She was reminded of the girl of white who had once saved her and her brother. She looked coolly upon Gold.

“No. We follow her because of the whole world, she is the only one *right*.”

“Wha-” Gold was stunned, his eyes wide open. “That tragedy was *right*?! Hundreds of thousands of people died there!”

“Indeed. Many lives had been lost. Perhaps many demihuman slaves, too, had not managed to escape.”

“Then-”

“Sir Hero,” the princess interrupted his objection, “who do you fight for?”

His breath hitched. The barb stuck in his heart burrowed deeper.

“There is a legend among the elves. It says the World Tree and its Saplings were the pillars that held up the world.”

“I... know about that.”

“Then why is the human race using their power? Is that power not what should have been used to sustain the world?”

“...”

“I shan’t just tell you the answer. Think it through. But this is not what I have called you here for,” she turned to her brother, “Bring it here.”

“Understood.”

The prince took a package wrapped in cloth in the back of the room and brought it in front of Gold.

“This is...”

It was a greatsword of mythril, holding within it a strong magic. Gold’s hand shivered as he looked upon the powerful shine.

“It is a weapon made by the ancient elves. It had once been used by an elven Hero, our grandfather. He was killed by humans a century ago, as they had seen him as a threat.”

There were Heroes of races other than humans. But they were feared by the humans, and had all fallen before the humans’

military might.

“I...”

“Apologies, I had said too much. Sir Hero, please take it.”

“Wha...”

“It is one of the treasures of the elves that we had luckily managed to

bring with us. Hero or not, I do not think anyone would be comfortable without a weapon by their side. Please, sir Hero... use it for the sake of the World.”

“... then I shall accept, milady.”

Call forth the Hero's power for the world, not for the human race.

Gold bowed, overwhelmed by the answer that was still yet nebulous in his mind.

And then, right at that moment, a shout reached his ears.

“...t-the humans are attacking!”

The human army was approaching the demihuman's hidden village.

They were marching through the forest, so no horses or carriages. Everyone was on foot. But their number was reported to be about a hundred, and nervousness ran through the villagers as they were informed of the situation.

“Do they have knights? What about their provisions?”

“There were about ten canine beastman slaves at the back of their formation. They were carrying a *mountain* of supplies, but the soldiers were carrying some too, so I don't know how many days they'd packed for. And about the knights, umm... I think maybe around five or six.”

“What are their goals? Are they heading here?”

“I don't know... They look like they're searching for something, so I think it's only a matter of time before they find us.”

As the elven hunter relayed the report, the adults began their discussion, their faces grim.

There were quite a lot of people in the hidden village, but most of the youngsters and the hot-blooded men had gone to join the resistance. The only people remaining were adults with low combat power, women, children, and the elderlies.

“Everyone, please stay calm. We should focus on thinking of a solution.”

“Princess...”

The elven royal twin appeared from the log mansion. Several frowned upon seeing Gold behind them, a *human*. The princess noticed them. Her eyes faintly narrowed, and she quietly turned to look up at Gold.

“Sir Hero... you must have heard the report. Which country do you think the army should belong to?”

“...they sound like a company from Seize Kingdom.”

If the group had around a hundred men and five or six knights, then they'd be split into two platoons, each led by a platoon leader and their second-in-command. Overall command was held by the company leader and their aide.

Considering the number of men, Gold expected it should be a large country rather than a small one.

The villagers gasped, knowing that a large country was attacking them. Their fear spread to the children, and one of them tried to run toward Gold, seeking safety in the herculean man. But the kid's mother held onto her child in a panic. She pulled the kid away from the human.

Gold stayed quiet. The princess continued the discussion as if nothing had happened.

“...sir Hero, what shall be your intention?”

“Sister...” her younger brother whispered his disapproval at her inaction against the mother, but she ignored him, continuing to stare at Gold.

“...if they come, I'll talk to them.” Gold replied.

If the human soldiers didn't notice the village, all the better. Their marching course was slightly veering off the village, as a matter of fact. But then their scouts found the place, and unsurprisingly, they began heading directly for it.

The next day. As the troops approached the fence surrounding the hidden village, the voice of a man who appeared to be the company

leader rang out in the forest.

“Hear me, demihumans! Our company belongs to the Second Division, Outer Western Front, Seize Kingdom! Our country had been assaulted by evil monsters called ‘dark pixies’, and we have been pursuing the fugitive responsible for summoning them. They were reported to have come here! Surrender peacefully, and allow us to do our investigation!”

Just as with any other country, Seize Kingdom was also suffering from attacks by the dark pixies suspected to have been summoned by prison escapist, criminals incarcerated for holding dangerous ideologies.

Their hideouts had been raided and scoured by investigators. The report had revealed that their goal was not simply sowing chaos in society and overthrowing governments with the dark pixies — they wanted power enough to destroy the system of *nations* itself. To that end, they were plotting to summon the Fairy King by using the dark pixies as a medium.

As the worldwide attacks all made use of the same summoning of dark pixies, the humans had determined that a single mastermind existed. Yet they could not find a single trace of this mastermind beside the name ‘Brian’.

Seize Kingdom had discovered one of the summoners’ hideout in the western forest. They had found the fugitive and several accomplices, but the criminals had all killed themselves with poison. The arrest was a failure. Then, the Second Division in charge of this mission had ordered two battalions to split into companies to comb over the forest as a special investigation task force. As eight companies combed through the enormous western woodland, one found traces of a camp left behind by a hunter. They cut their way into the forest depths, and there they found the hidden village.

Once the company leader was aware of the demihuman nature of the village, combined with the fact that the demihuman resistance was making trouble all over the world, he concluded that the village was related to the criminals he was pursuing. He came to the hidden village with an aggressive order of unconditional surrender for the villagers.

But the people appearing to answer him were only an elven girl who

looked ten years of age and a well-built human man.

“I am Gold of Torrann! I ask, is there anyone here who know of my name?!”

The company leader widened his eyes upon hearing the name. It was the name of one of the Heroes, the Warrior, the man whose fame had spread throughout all of the human race. The company leader, himself a viscount, had had a single opportunity to see him several years earlier. He knew the Hero’s face.

“Oooh, sir Hero! What twist of fate brought you here? You should know this is the territory of Seize Kingdom. This is our land!”

This forest was over a thousand kilometers away from the westernmost village of the kingdom. It held not a single trace of the human race, and yet the company leader had shamelessly proclaimed it theirs. Gold faintly frowned, and he answered the man.

“In my journey to train myself, I had come to rely on the aid of this village. I swear to my own name that there is no such criminal here. I beseech you to seek elsewhere.”

“I apologize, but I cannot comply, even if you are the Hero. Our mission concerns the survival of our very own country, the Kingdom of Seize. As such, we cannot allow any foreign interference to our domestic matter... ah, but pardon me! Sir Gold no longer belonged to a country. Please, I ask forgiveness for my mistake.” The company leader said and bowed, his politeness without a trace of sincerity.

Gold was the oldest among the Heroes, and people had held him in high esteem for many years. Yet ever since his overwhelming failure to prevent the destruction of the Sapling and his country’s collapse — even if the country had been assaulted on two fronts at the same time by the Dark Lady Whitehare and the Troll King — military men and women of countries throughout the world now treated him with contempt and ridicule, thinking his power to have declined. The

lower-ranked knights, those who had idolized the Heroes, were the most disappointed. The company leader even hated him, believing Gold to have betrayed their trust and expectations.

“...indeed, Torrann no longer existed, and I am no longer royalty. All

the same, do you mean to say you cannot trust the words of a recognized Hero?"

"You say you still possess the Hero's power? When you couldn't even protect your country? At any rate, we have no intention to pin any crime on the demihumans, nor will any indiscriminate persecution happen to them."

"Then..."

"In case we judge the village to be unrelated to the criminals, and as long as you pay tax to our country, then I shall entreat the Second Division commander to allow this settlement to continue existing. One hundred large gold coins. If you can't pay, then turn yourselves into slaves to pay for it! Women, children, anyone who can move!"

"What?!"

Not just Gold, even the villagers staying behind were wide-eyed in disbelief.

At that moment, the hitherto silent elven girl spoke up and stepped forward.

"Please wait!"

"What now, little elven girl, something to say for yourself?"

"You claim this forest belongs to the human Seize Kingdom. However, this region is far away from human territory, and no humans wander here. Why do you say this land belongs to you?" The princess protested, dauntless before the company leader's tyranny.

The man only scoffed.

"It's decided in the international summit meeting, of course. Any land of the world is governed by the country that controlled the Sapling in the region. It's how the world can have its stability." The company leader said, naturally proclaiming that the whole world belonged only to the human race as if it was a matter of course.

The princess widened her eyes a fraction, then quietly closed them.

He spoke with arrogance, that was true, but she could see where he was coming from if she looked upon his words from the viewpoint of the human rulers. All living beings pursued territory, to find a place

where the group could raise their young in safety and to expand it. This village had done the same — it was built upon territory stolen from wild animals.

Calling only the human race ‘evil’ for doing what all life was doing wouldn’t be right, she thought.

But the human race had gone too far. They were completely rejecting *coexistence* with all life that held territories. In other words, the humans were making *war* with the whole world. It was the reason why even the World Tree, the pillar that propped up the world, had abandoned them.

But there was no point to her trying to explain all this to a simple military man of no importance. It’d just be meaningless words.

“Understood. We do not have human coins, though we do possess some mythril silver coins issued by the nation of elves.

If it isn’t enough, then I shall surrender myself and my brother to be slaves... sir Hero, would you be our witness?”

“Princess... that’s...”

The mythril silver coins of the elven nation were as big as large gold coins, and with their artistic value in consideration, were worth ten times as much. And the princess even offered herself as a slave in case it wasn’t enough, asking a Hero, one whose words held significant power, to witness the contract.

She could have appealed to Gold’s kindness and asked him to, if not kill them, then at least repel them, and he would have accepted. But the elven princess hadn’t allowed herself to so easily rely on the sword of a Hero. Her nobility and bravery struck Gold deep in his heart.

Yet the elven princess had taken the greed of mankind far too lightly.

“Is that what you want, elf girl? Fine, here’s a better deal: we’ll take all your villagers as slaves, your mythril silver coins, and any valuables you have. Then we’ll see what the king has to say for your ‘wish’. Men, take them into custody!”

“Wha...”

The princess was speechless. The human army began their march

toward her. The earth shook with their steps.

“And you call yourself a knight?! You would raise your spear against the innocent?!” Gold shouted, enraged.

“What strange words you speak, sir Hero. Demihumans aren’t *human*. This is our land. *Resources* are there to be utilized.” The company leader said, his true thoughts finally laid bare.

“Damn you!”

Gold set his hand to his sword.

“Do my eyes betray me, sir Gold? Am I seeing a Hero about to oppose us? Are you not a Hero, a protector of the *world*?”

Gold’s breath hitched, himself rooted to the spot. The soldiers spared a glance at the man as they broke into the village.

The princess, bound by the knights, was staring at Gold as if taking his measure.

The soldiers flooded the village, tying up demihumans one after another. Gold was paralyzed by his *position* of being the Hero.

And then a familiar voice of a kid rang out from deep inside the village.

“MISTEERR!”

The elven boy named Yol scampered toward Gold as soon as he saw him, as if running away from something frightening.

Taken by surprise, one of the knights reflexively thrust his spear. Before he could register what he saw, Gold was already jumping out.

“Yol!”

Gold had once saved a human and left a demihuman to die. And now, he finally understood in truth the *value of life* as the Dark Lady had said to him.

There were no humans, no demihumans. There was just Gold trying to save a young child. He stood up, a bright aura surrounding him, the

greatsword given by the princess now in his hands as if it'd always belonged there. And before the soldiers could realize what happened, Yol was already inside Gold's arms, the knights and soldiers around him all mowed down by a single flash of his sword.

"Mister!"

"Yol... have you been hurt?"

The company leader shouted.

"Sir Hero, what in the world are you doing?! You will be branded the worst traitor to the human race, Hero or not!"

Gold turned to look at the man, his eyes cleared of doubt. His smile regained the absolute confidence he once had in the past, and he readied his mythril greatsword.

"Indeed... I am not a Hero of *humanity*. I am a Hero of the *world*! And as the protector of all, I cannot let you commit such atrocities!"

Gold swung down, and the light of his greatsword cut down a third of the company. The company leader, bruised and battered, had to be carried off by his soldiers. They retreated.

The human threat was gone. Inside the village exploding with cheers, Gold silently knelt down before the princess.

"Princess... I am a man who knows nothing but fighting. Please, tell me the truth of the world."

"Yes, I shall, *our* Hero."

And so, the Warrior learned of the truth of this world and stood as the vanguard of the demihumans. In order to truly save the world, he chose the path of being an enemy of humanity.

Chapter 72 THE MEANING OF EVIL

We were at an electric stand on the highway, waiting for the car to charge, and I was moping around in my usual outfit of a parka and denim skirt. Jennifer, the self-proclaimed Dark Lady worshipper, was fidgeting in restlessness. She waved her smartphone in front of my eyes.

“Hey, Shedy, can I go on the internet already? Pleaaase?”

“...as long as you don’t talk about me.”

“Aww...”

Bullseye.

She’d been trying her best to stop herself from telling everyone about me, apparently, and it was about time for her internet addiction to relapse.

She started speaking in a hurry, trying to defend herself. “B-but our server’s locked super tight! Even my company’s intelligence division can’t get into it! And everyone in the group already knew that world’s real!”

“...what?” That *was* surprising. I looked at her, and Jennifer puffed up her modest chest in pride.

“Our group already thought that world was too suspicious in the first place. Too real, you know? We started to look around, and once I recovered a deleted log in my company, we found out the truth! Amazing, right?!”

So she actually managed to figure it out by herself. So talented, yet her personality’s so disappointing...

Anyway, it wouldn’t be good if anyone else knew about Yggdrasia. Had she even given any thought about the reason why that corporation would want to be secretive about what might as well be the greatest discovery of this era?

The corporation might still not be able to travel there yet, but they had a new form of energy called ‘mana’ and the technology to make

use of it. They'd only been applying it in a military context in the form of magitools, but if information spread, sooner or later this world might be able to use *magic* too.

Offensive spells allowed you to destroy vehicles with your bare hands, and healing spells could regenerate lost limbs in a blink of an eye. If people here knew how to use them, they would turn into a swarm of locusts to devour Yggdrasia's mana dozens of times faster than they were doing at the moment.

Currently, only a single country was hoarding the information, so there was no real chaos in Yggdrasia or here, and I could still deal with the problem quietly.

But if the knowledge spread throughout the world and they got ready for an invasion... then I would destroy the civilization of Earth, genocide or not.

"...Shedy...? It's getting kind of... cold..."

"Really? Anyway, mind telling me who knows about it?"

I let loose some coldness and demonic presence and shot her a glance of crimson eyes. Jennifer twitched and stood ramrod straight.

"No, nonono, please don't kill them! There are some middle-eastern royalty and some serious celebrities in there too!"

And then she just blurted out their names and so much more information in her panic.

"No one will know."

"Eeehhh..."

"Oh, fine... Jennifer, you tell them that whoever leak the secret is going to get their whole country wiped off the map."

"R-roger, ma'am!"

Her face twitched, herself remembering the tragedy that had happened to the 7th research center. This should be enough for the time being.

"What are you going to do online?"

“Umm... I haven’t logged in Yggdrasia for a while, and I wanted to check out the news too. Let’s see... there it goes.”

“You can log in with that phone?”

“Aaah, no, no full-diving into your avatar, but you can use the VR forum and a few other things when logged in.”

“Hmm... can I borrow your ID?”

“Eh? Um, yes, but why...?”

She tilted her head in puzzlement but still gave me her phone.

Generally, logging in with a personal account required biometric authentication, so no one else could do it aside from the account owner themselves. Not a problem for me, though. I took out my prepaid phone, tapping it against Jennifer’s to copy her ID, and logged in in incognito mode with my **[Cyber-Manipulation]**. At the same time, I also restored the user ID of No. 13 that I had once used and had since been deleted.

In incognito mode, I browsed through the historical records of the forum Jennifer talked about, gathering a few glimpses into the situation of the other world.

Dark pixies? What are those? Apparently they’re really making a mess of the human countries right now. No one knew what they were? Didn’t look like an official game event. They seemed a bit different from militarized avatars.

And one of the Heroes was missing? If it was that weirdo, then I hoped he’s actually dead.

...mm?

A strange ringing sound rang out. Some sort of icon appeared in a corner of my vision. This was... a mail? Why? How? I checked the sender, but there was no text, only a symbol that looked like a tree.

...the World Tree?!

“...eh?”

The mail automatically opened, and I instantly logged out. In front of

me, in front of my real body, there floated two white magic stones.

Were these the Saplings' magic stones? The moment the thought passed through my mind, they flew inside me and were absorbed. I immediately felt more powerful.

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Archdemon Lv. 23]

☐The rabbit demon of Laplace. Trickster and guide of man's fate.

[Magic Points: 81,300/91,000] 6,000 ↑

[Total Combat Power: 90,400/100,100] 6,600 ↑

[Unique Skill: <Causality Alteration> <Dimensional Manipulation> <Absorption> <Materialization>]

[Racial Skill: <Fear> <Mist Form>]

[Simple Identification] [Human Form (Wonderful)] [Subspace Inventory]

[Dark Lady]

It's the real deal. They were exactly the white magic stones that I received whenever the soul of a secret alpha tester transformed into a new World Tree Sapling. And not only that, No. 01's Cyber-Manipulation even evolved?

It seemed the newly evolved skill was no longer restricted to only cyberspace. I think I could now use it on real space, too.

But what happened? Did somebody other than me destroy an existing Sapling? I thought the demihuman resistance still hadn't had that much power yet, but maybe they could handle a small rural country.

This was the proof of their resolve. They were the one to have allowed the humans to go so far, after all. If the demihumans had made their decision, then it wouldn't be my place to say anything.

But, well, I never thought the World Tree would use the connection to me to send the magic stones all the way to Earth.

The Tree was more skilled than I imagined.

“What’s wrong?”

“No, nothing.” Jennifer looked puzzled at my answer. I gave her a faint smile. “Anyway, it’s about time we should leave.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

We got on her fully-charged car.

The magic stones were a nice surprise boost to my power, and I got more magic to play with now. Maybe I could even splurge a little bit and test out my new ability.

I leaned out the car window, my hand aiming at a highway camera that was staring at us, and I *squeezed*.

The 12th research center had been the location housing the internet department, and there, a terrorist had murdered all members of the security team without leaving a trace. They were nicknamed the Ghost.

At first, the incident was believed to have been industrial espionage done by a rival company or a special task force of a foreign country. The 4th research center was supposed to have tightened their security in response, and yet even the compound fell victim to the Ghost who had once more left no traces. Beginning with Deputy Director Jace, who’d been the on-site supervisor, two hundred thirty eight main researchers and eighteen ex-mercenaries serving as security guards had been killed.

At the same time, fifty soldiers on-loan from the army had gone missing. The group was formed from elite soldiers, with the majority of them having once suffered damage to their psyches from a previous mistake by the corporation (the

‘Madness of Brian’ incident, in which the corporation was forced to pay six million dollars to the army as reparations), plus a few new members to supplement the team before the elite group returned to their duty. There were no records of them having left the compound, and so the army was suspecting the corporation of human experiments.

The researcher casualties were also a large setback, but not as much as the complete destruction of research data stored in an air-gapped supercomputer and the supercomputer itself. The facility doing experimental work on magical weapons was also reduced to rubble. Total loss was over twelve billion dollars. It was a heavy blow to the corporation.

As a result of the incidents, the government and corporation now assumed the Ghost's goal to be information about 'the other world' and 'mana'. They further ramped up security, their main targets being any travelers from the east. They returned the magical weapon project back to the 7th research center, where previous research data still remained, and special forces of the army were now deployed as security guards.

At the same time, the internal intelligence department of the corporation was also surveilling over three-thousand two-hundred of its staff members who were showing suspicious activities. The surveillance was done 24/7 with the use of security cameras all over the country. But one day, all of the department's computers, including the mainframe, had suffered an external hacking attempt. Overvoltage damage had rendered them unusable, resulting in the loss of thirty years' worth of the suspect database and surveillance data.

"Shedy, we're nearly there! Let's go let's go!"

"...so we are."

It was several days after. We arrived at the state housing the 7th research center. It wasn't really all that far away, but security checkpoints and police pullovers had gotten a lot more frequent, which ate up a lot of our travel time.

I supposed it was about time I leave Jennifer... If anything, I should have cut ties with her ever since I acquired my Dimensional Manipulation and deleted the data implicating her.

"Alright, that's far enough. Thanks for the ride."

"What?! No! I'll go with you until the end! Of course, I'll help you in Yggdrasia too as a member of the Dark Army..."

she said, rushing, trying to get her words out as fast as she could.

“Jennifer.” I interrupted her, turning my voice a fraction harsher.

She wasn’t aware of how much danger she was in. The government and the corporation had been suppressing media reports, but there had been many deaths at the 4th research center. And this place would be the same. Many more would die.

And even if she knew Yggdrasia still existed, somewhere inside of her, she still believed it was just an extension of a game.

“In Yggdrasia... in that other world, the human race is stealing magic power from the Saplings without limits. It was why the balance of the world was collapsing.”

“Eh...? I-isn’t that really bad...?”

“It is. It’s why I’ve been destroying the Saplings that the humans were using as undeserved sources of mana. I do it because I know no other way.”

“Then that world will be fine, right? That’s good...” Jennifer sighed in relief, her expression brightened. She had her own attachment to that world, I was sure.

I continued, my voice low.

“Yes, I’ll save that world. Even if I have to sacrifice every single human there.”

“...eh?”

She gaped, seemingly not yet registering what I said.

“I’ve destroyed about twenty Saplings over there. Millions have died by my actions, and many more will. Perhaps tens of millions, even.”

Imagine a modern city of Earth. Then imagine it suddenly losing all its electricity and petroleum, and starving carnivorous dinosaurs were being released in limitless number. How many people would survive?

“B-but...”

“That world is no *game*. Do you understand?”

I reminded her of the reality of Yggdrasia. Jennifer went pale, her head hung low.

That's what it meant to be on the side of the Dark Lady. On the side of the Evil of the world.

"You should stay on the side of humans," I said, "...goodbye."

I walked past her, our backs turned against each other, and I ran toward the 7th research center.

No one else needed to stain their hands with blood aside from me. The Dark Lady, the Demon.

Jennifer understood my words. She stayed root at the spot, head still low, until I could no longer see her.

"...well then, let's get started."

The day turned to night. In the distance were rows of high-rise buildings. The lights of the town blinked on.

In the center of it was a large compound, a gaping space within the forest of concrete, as if someone had scooped off all the tall buildings there. The corporation's 7th research center. The place that had killed me and the secret alpha testers.

As I expected with the messes I'd made, there was *ludicrous* security. I already saw innumerable drones just from afar, and there were people patrolling the place who looked obviously military.

I could just rely on the power of an archdemon to force my way in. Or I could do this another way.

I activated **[Causality Alteration]** and **[Dimensional Manipulation]** at the same time. I stretched my right hand toward the city and gently squeezed.

All the lights I could see vanished from the streets, plunging the city into darkness.

A/N: So which faction destroyed those Saplings? Actually, as long as the castle barrier falls, the World Tree itself can eliminate the Sapling.

A belated map update.



Chapter 73 THE SIN OF MAN

The city was suddenly plunged into darkness as their electricity vanished. Screams of fear and anger rang out. Black smoke from fiery accidents roiled up the sky.

I leaped on top of a tall building and peered down on the 7th research center. As I expected, they'd switched to their indoor generators. Still, it seemed their generators weren't as powerful as the 4th's, as the number of drones had visibly decreased. The soldiers on guard against possible attacks were now running around in a hurry.

Their main equipment and computers seemed to have already been disconnected from the network as a countermeasure against hacking. Looked like they'd learned from the 4th. I think I could still hack them directly if I used **[Dimensional Manipulation]**, but I wasn't used to the new skill yet. Doing anything that required accuracy was still difficult.

But, well, if I was going to test my **[Dimensional Manipulation]**, I might as well try out another new 'ability'.

I aimed my palm at the roof of the 7th research center building, focusing my eyes, and used my new skill to create a dimensional warp at the target.

I vanished from the roof of the tall building with a *fwip* of rushing air

—
“Whoa?!”

—and teleported onto the roof of the 7th research center, my feet about 30 centimeters above it. I tucked into a forward roll, only barely saving myself from tripping, and moved into cover.

This was... somewhat difficult to use. It was the first time I ever tried ‘spatial teleportation’. I was constantly using my mist to sense my surroundings, so the sudden change had disoriented me.

I was limited to only locations I could see, and just a jump of several hundreds meters already ate up five thousand of my magic. Maybe it’d get better if I had more practice with it.

Oh well, no point worrying about it. I’d practice my teleportation once I got back to Yggdrasia.

Alright, focus. I moved toward the roof entrance, my attention on any possible cameras. With the evolution of my Cyber-Manipulation, I was quite sure I now no longer showed up on digital cameras, but analog ones would still see me. Also, I always felt strangely uncomfortable whenever I was in front of the lens, perhaps a legacy of the times I was still a human... I wondered if it was just me?

I unlocked three digital locks and entered the research center. Through the door was a stairwell that doubled as an emergency exit. There were security cameras, but not that many. They had a 180 degrees field of vision, but only around half of it would actually show up on the terminal screens, while the rest were just motion sensors. I could just ignore them.

Probably.

I reduced my weight to the minimum necessary, then leveraged my inhuman capabilities to drop all the way down to the ground floor.

The floors upstairs were where the normal employees were. I left them alone. The 12th research center, which was a high-rise building in the middle of downtown, had all its important equipment high up. On the other hand, the 4th research center, which had an arsenal of experimental weapons, instead placed their crucial equipment deep

below ground, perhaps to avoid losing them to bombing attacks. Most of the high-ranked researchers working with them were also located nearby.

This place was architecturally closer to the 4th, so my plan was to raid them from below with the assumption that their important facilities were also underground.

But this stairwell only went to the first underground floor. If this place was the same as the 4th, then my only choice was to use the dedicated elevator to go underground.

“Before that, though...”

The underground generators and computers were carefully air-gapped, so I couldn’t deal with them directly yet, but I could still hack the aboveground equipment to disable their satellite communication.

I entered the first underground floor from the stairwell and headed toward the elevator that would bring me to the bottom.

There were almost no researchers or staff members around. Instead, there were soldiers patrolling in two-man teams, all of them fully equipped with night and infrared-vision masks and more.

...should I tell them digital equipment wouldn’t see me? I readied my straight sword and combat knife, silently sneaking up to a pair of soldiers. I waited until they went into a camera blindspot and stabbed deep into their necks, killing the two at the same time.

I froze and disintegrated the spilled blood and jammed the two corpses into the corner of a nearby room. Then I immediately left to deal with the next soldiers, one pair after another.

Where *was* the elevator? If it turned out the place didn’t have an underground after I’d done all this, I was going to sulk.

“...ah.”

I just had an idea. I picked up a mobile device from one of the soldiers I’d disabled. As I expected, it had a map of this floor. So that’s where it was...

I slowly moved toward an unmarked door, disabling any soldiers I met on the way, and entered the room. I headed to the back and touched a

blank wall, revealing the disguised elevator.

Of course, I didn't just press the elevator call button like an idiot. I quietly forced the doors open and went into the shaft, dropping to the bottom. It was the sixth underground floor, it seemed. The second to the fifth underground floors didn't hold any facilities. They looked to be nothing more than the foundation for the aboveground building.

It would have been a scene straight out of a comedy if the elevator was coming at that exact moment. Thankfully, it was still staying on the bottom floor.

I lifted up the elevator box with one hand, the other gently forcing open the door to the bottom floor. There was a soldier standing guard there, wearing some seriously bulky equipment.

I let out some mist to check out the area. There really was just the single soldier. Was that thing covering them a sort of power armor? I didn't know how much confidence they had in their armor, but it was true that with it on, I'd have a more difficult time stabbing them with the blades I had on hand.

I could tear them apart with my claws, but I didn't think I needed to.

I slipped through the elevator door gap as mist, flicking myself to directly above their head. I turned human behind them, twisting their neck 180 degrees, killing them.

The alarm suddenly sounded.

“...eh?”

I took a closer look to see if there'd been anything on their armor that could have done it. It turned out it wasn't on their armor, it was the soldier himself.

“...an avatar?!”

Motes of light slipped from the gaps in the armor, and the empty hunk of metal slumped on the ground.

The manaless avatars usable on Earth could only exert 70% the physical capabilities of a normal person, no matter who was driving it. It had been the reason why they'd been researching mana to develop a military-capable avatar, and it was also why I didn't expect them to

use avatars here... aaah, I see. That's what the power armor was for.

They must have decided to use electricity instead of wasting mana. Maybe the reason why I felt like this place was generating less power was because they were using it in their power armor.

As I busied myself in my thoughts, soldiers equipped from head to toes ran toward me from the other end of the corridor.

"Target sighted!"

"No digital equipment! Aim with your eyes!"

"—target confirmed! It's the bunny girl! No. 13!"

"Shit! The damned demon's come here again!"

'Demon', I see... I was indeed one, but it sounded less like they knew what I was and more like someone devout was just cursing me.

Well, whatever.

The soldiers fired their magic assault rifles, filling the hallway with enchanted bullets. Magic weapons might have been able to hurt me the last time I came here with just ten thousand combat power, but now? It just felt like they were throwing peas at me.

Anyway, so I'd been so careful to keep my identity hidden, but I never expected I'd be revealed like this. It was honestly a bit depressing.

"Hahh..."

Fine then. I thought it was about time anyway. *I'd cut their communication, so it'd probably take a bit of time before the information spread*, I thought, trying to console myself.

I didn't need to hold back any longer. I blew mist of extreme cold at them, freezing the bullets that filled the hallway and the soldiers all at once.

"So it is her..."

Audrey, the current Deputy Director of the 7th research center, muttered as she heard the soldier's report. The terrible hunch she'd had had become reality. Audrey rubbed her forehead, trying to dislodge the slight headache she'd gotten.

No. 13. The girl of white who'd entered a new world with a monster avatar, fighting even until the last moments of her life, and at the end, becoming a true *monster*. She had come back for her vengeance.

At that time, she had called herself a Demon. In fear and in shock, Audrey had reported the girl's words to her superiors, but they and the government had taken it as nothing more than the ramblings of a mad girl, saying it was "just a religious

declaration of 'evil'". They had given the order to all the research centers to capture her and investigate her ability. They only saw her as an esper with the ability to cross between worlds, no more.

But the girl was no simple esper. She might as well be a real demon with the power she held.

Audrey had also reported the mass murders and the battles between the girl and the militarized monster avatars, yet the top brass only waved it off as the natural happenings of another world. They still thought it was someone else's problem.

They didn't see the danger.

"Deputy Director! We've lost contact with the fourth to the seventh sections!"

"No signal from the soldiers at the ninth!"

"The main power plant had fallen! Switching to reserve power!"

"Efficiency of life support system dropping from low temperature!"

"A part of the data server is not responding!"

The staff members' fearful reports rang out, painting a terrible picture.

The girl hadn't shown herself until now. But Audrey knew that what happened was in the capability of No. 13 if the girl got serious. The control room where Audrey was only had two flesh-and-blood soldiers

as guards, four staff members, and herself. If the reports were correct, and if this control room fell before the girl, then all the military data about mana would be virtually wiped out.

The only thing left would be the data about the 12th's player avatars that were capable of growth by consuming mana, as well as the small amount of magical weaponry that had been manufactured and given over to the army. The militarized monster avatars, still in the middle of development, and the knowledge of their applications on Earth would be gone forever, buried in the darkness of this vault.

Something hit the titanium steel door with a hefty, metallic *clang!* The impact repeated several times, and mist blew in through the cracks. In scant moments, the fog transformed into the shape of a person. Stood there was a girl of white with rabbit ears. No. 13.

"Keep her away!"

"Hold the line! Hold the fucking line!"

The two soldiers aimed their magical assault rifles. The staff members, minds muddled by fear, pulled out their handguns.

"Stop!"

Audrey shouted before she could even think. She knew they could do nothing to the girl.

Yet before her warning could reach them, the hail of bullets was already loose. No. 13 squeezed her hand, and blood poured out of every single inch of the bodies of everyone holding a gun. They collapsed in pools of crimson.

Audrey was the only survivor. She whimpered. Her legs gave out.

No. 13 tilted her head at the sight of the woman, rabbit ears flopping. Realization flashed across her face.

"Aah, it's you. Long time no see."

The girl sounded as if she was just meeting an acquaintance by happenstance.

What the hell are you saying with so much blood on your hands?! Audrey thought. Strength, or at least something resembling anger, returned to

her heart.

“YOU! Do you not feel anything, killing so many?!”

No. 13 only narrowed her eyes a fraction. “I suppose it’s not exactly fun killing *animals* I’m not eating...” she replied, sounding as if she was just hunting deers or ducks.

“A-animals...?” Audrey said, dumbfounded. Then she shouted, her voice reverberating in the room, “Do you truly feel nothing?! They had parents! They had families they loved!”

Shedy silently approached the sitting woman, looking down on her with frosty eyes.

“Loving families? What’s that? Parents? Mine kicked me for being an eyesore. Did you know they’d tried to choke me to death?”

Words failed Audrey. She thought she could hear those scarlet eyes saying something.

—*Are they not humans?*—

Audrey had read her files. She’d known her family situation. She even knew of the rumors that the adults in the facility were mistreating her.

But it was the first time she truly realized that the girl in front of her, No. 13, had not received a single bit of love ever since she was born.

She understood now, how heavy the sin of mankind was, that they had created the demon in front of her.

“I only care about my ninety-nine comrades, and... well, whatever. By the way, would you mind telling me where the military base that got the data is? I won’t kill you if you do.”

After No. 13 got what she wanted from Audrey and destroyed the data stored at the 7th research center, the girl vanished as if melting into the darkness. Until several days later when Audrey was rescued, the woman could do nothing beside sitting there with knees hugged, her head hung low.

A/N: Shedy already no longer cares a whit about the people who used to be her parents. Or to be more precise, ever since she'd stopped being a human and started being a demon, she'd been absolutely apathetic about them.

What she currently cares about are mourning the 99 secret alpha testers, and the few kins she has. And a certain 'Promise'

she has too, but it's getting into spoiler territory about the end.

Chapter 74 THE BREWING STORM

It had been several months since the official release of the MMORPG *World of Yggdrasia*. Due to the Dark Lady Whitehare's campaign that had begun at the same time as the official release, in the eyes of the new players, *World of Yggdrasia* had now become a game set in a world being threatened by the Dark Lady. Recently, with the beginning of what was assumed to be a new special event — the 'Dark Pixie Attack' — veteran players were now aware that even the Central Continent was no longer the relatively safe sanctuary it used to be. They, former beta players, continued to busy themselves in catching up with the latest info on the VR forum.

"So what the hell is with this event? I can't even safely hunt outside."

"'Safely hunting' is such an oxymoron, though I know what you mean. Maybe the high-ranked guys can handle it, but the new players must be pissing their pants."

"They're called 'Dark Pixies', right? Yeah, they're gross as fuck. Not the Dark Bunny Lady's minions, right?"

"Hmm... the devs didn't really say anything outright, but I have the feeling they want to pin it on the Dark Lady."

"But like, you know how flip-floppy the devs are with their game direction? Like, the details we're getting aren't fitting together, if you know what I mean."

"It feels to me like since that corporation's so huge, there's a department that's making up an event by themselves and didn't notice the main management."

"Personally I think the event's nice. Killing those dark pixies raised my maximum magic a lot."

“I guess it’s an event for the hardcore gamers, then.”

“Aww... but I’m the having-fun type. I just want to open a potion shop.”

“So I’ll preface this by saying that it’s still not confirmed information, but apparently it doesn’t have anything to do with the Bunny Lady.”

“What do you know?”

“A part of the demihumans is fighting against humans now, right? They’re saying they worship the Bunny.”

“Really? That’s... troubling. There’s been a lot of requests at the adventurer’s guild to defend towns against demihuman terrorists, but they’re freeing slaves, right? Fighting them feels awkward.”

“There’s that too, but those demihumans also sometimes come help out whenever a town’s being attacked by the dark pixies. In other words, the Bunny’s faction doesn’t have anything to do with the dark pixies.”

“Umm... so the Dark Bunny Lady isn’t a villain?”

“I mean, they’re just on different sides. Another two small countries’ Saplings were just destroyed the other day. She’s basically the enemy of the human race.”

“Yeah, ‘human race’ being the operative word there... by the way, I’ve come across some weird info.”

“What what? Come on, spill!”

“There’s this particular site that’s only open to its members, and it says the Bunny’s goal is to liberate the Saplings from the humans stealing their mana and save the world, since mana isn’t infinite.”

“Lol the fuck is that? Who wrote this fanfic?”

“No, seriously. Assuming that’s true, then the Bunny’s actions and the demihumans’ actions make a lot of sense in a weird way.”

“God, the hell kinda twist is that...”

“I mean, it’s not really official info. Just some rumors I picked up.”

“Now that’s interesting. If it’s true, then I can worship the Bunny Lady without any regrets.”

“If so... then who’s our *enemy*?”

The game had officially released the Rank 6 update. Rank 5 in this world was termed the Expert rank, and the new rank surpassed even that, requiring the players to go beyond human limits. The rank upgrade quest was *brutal*, but all the same, a small group of players had succeeded.

[Isaac] [Race: Human

] [Player]

[Magic Points (MP): 200/200] [Hit Points (HP): 320/320]

[Strength: 25] [Vitality: 22] [Agility: 25] [Dexterity: 10]

**[Swordsmanship 5.5] [Defense 3] [Reinforcement Magic 4]
[Healing Magic 3] [Self-Reinforcement]**

[Total Combat Power: 2290]

“Please surrender! We won’t harm you!”

To the south of the Eastern Continent was the 61st human country, a small country named Arruine. In a nearby wasteland, Isaac’s clan was locked in combat with a group of beastman resistance fighters.

As a player who had had contact with Shedy, the Demon Lord Whitehare, Isaac believed that the demihumans' efforts to liberate their enslaved comrades was a praiseworthy endeavor. But he could not stand by if the same demihumans were trying to destroy the Saplings.

Arruine's knight squadron had been planning to raid one of the resistance's bases. Isaac had heard the rumors at the adventurer's guild, and he had been skeptical of the anonymous quest for investigation that the guild had issued. To prevent the destruction of the Sapling, he had rallied his clan and arrived at his current location.

The party had focused on speed and combat power. There was Isaac, the warrior; Weed, the scout; Sandria, the magician; Guy, the tank; and Mia, the healer. There were only five of them, but the party was as powerful as dozens of knights.

Everyone were at Rank 5 with their combat power close to 1500. Isaac had broken the limits and reached Rank 6, and his total combat power was nearing 2300.

The base they'd discovered had housed nearly forty demihumans. Isaac had given his call to surrender, but the resistance team leader, a feline beastwoman, had declined. They began to chip at each other in small skirmishes. Isaac's party only had five members, yet they were putting up more than a good fight against forty resistance fighters.

Player characters weren't affected by fatigue and were well-balanced in their status. Isaac had given his call to surrender once more with that fact in mind, and the beautiful feline beastwoman that was their leader silently walked up to Isaac.

She wielded two swords, both curved like the katana.

"My name is Selille. What is yours, warrior?"

"I'm Isaac. Why are you trying to destroy the Saplings? Did Shedy... did the Dark Lady ordered it?"

Isaac's party had once traveled with Shedy and talked with her. They could no longer see the NPCs as simple AIs. They moved, they acted just like real people. Isaac's party was hesitant to simply rely on force just because it was a quest.

“We indeed revere her. But we do not do so because she is a Dark Lady.”

“Then why...?”

“...because our Lady is the only one doing the *right* thing to fix what had been our ancestors’ *naïveté*,” Selille scowled, her reply bitter.

“...naïveté? And what do you mean by ‘right’...?”

“I shan’t talk any further. It would be an insult to our forefathers. This is not something that concerns you, human. If you wish to stop us, then show me your strength.”

“...everyone, don’t interfere.”

Isaac helplessly readied his sword.

[Selille] [Race: Beastman

(Feline)] [Swordswoman]

[Magic Points (MP): 150/150] [Hit Points (HP): 250/250]

[Total Combat Power: 960]

With Isaac’s **[Identification]**, he determined that Selille was a swordswoman of around Rank 5. Isaac himself was equivalent to Rank 6, even if he hadn’t gotten all the way there yet. He had over twice her combat power.

He couldn’t understand what she’d said. But if she, the leader, lost here, then this resistance squad would probably retreat.

Everyone else ceased their fights to instead watch the leaders’ duel with intense focus.

Common sense would say that with her combat power, Selille wouldn’t even be able to win against the scout Weed, much less Isaac. Yet ever since the battle was joined, even with his superior power and speed, every swing of his sword looking as if it could cut apart boulders like butter, he had not once scratched Selille.

“...w-why...? I’m Rank 6...” Isaac muttered in bewilderment.

Selille looked at him with pitying eyes.

“Rank 6? Who granted you that title? Regrettably, the only person in the world who possessed swordsmanship of the sixth rank is the Blademaster. He seems nothing more than a fool at first glance, but I assure you, behind the fool’s appearance lay a monster beyond the realm of man.”

“...a monster...”

Isaac had completed the quest and had gained the title of Rank 6, but Isaac had not yet reached **[Swordsmanship 6]**.

Skills, such as swordsmanship, were automatically installed into avatars. But no one possessed swordsmanship skill equivalent to the 6th rank on Earth, and only the Blademaster Calimero had the skill even in Yggdrasia. The game had based the skill upon the Blademaster, but the recreation of his swordsmanship was still not yet perfect.

To recreate the skill of swordsmanship, the system would need to analyze millions of different patterns of combat against all kinds of enemies. If there was only a single swordsman, there would be far too little data to do anything.

The same went for magic spells of rank 7 and above. Their only users had been the high elves, and they had long since been extinct. It was the reason why the developers had been delaying the Rank 6 update.

And even the recreated Rank-5-and-below swordsmanship skills and magical spells were only *usable*. It might not matter when the players were fighting monsters, but when they fought against opponents of the same skill level, they would soon find themselves falling behind in experience, in tactics, even if their ability scores were higher.

And finally, while the players might have the heart to feel sorrow, anger, or to be moved by a story, they still didn’t have the *resolve*.

Isaac was struck dumb by the truth thrust before him. Selille sheathed her swords.

“Isaac. You have more than enough strength. But as you are at the moment, I do not think I can lose to you. Out of respect for you, we will retreat for the time being. Your comrades had not attempted to kill us, and you... you had treated us as *people*.”

The woman turned away. Just as she was about to depart, Isaac called out despite himself.

“W-wait, please wait!”

She stopped.

“...what is the ‘right’ thing, then?”

“...I shall tell you one thing. The magic of the World Tree is the life of this world itself. What do you think will happen if it is spent without end?”

Selille and the demihumans said no more. They left in silence.

Isaac’s party stayed quiet, unsure what they should say to their leader. A whisper left Isaac’s mouth.

“Is this place... is this world truly just a *game*?”

“...you’ve got nerves of steel, don’t you?”

Quarancinq was the City of Magic, as well as Yggdrasia’s holy land for all things magical. Its Tower of Truth housed the laboratory of Marlene, the Heroine of Magic renowned as the Sage. She was hosting a certain visitor.

Seated on a manticore-leather sofa, Marlene crossed her supple legs. In front of her were two men. One was Mason, the Temples’ ambassador that she had met many times. The other covered his whole body with a pitch-black cloak, the hood even hiding his face. The heavy presence of a Hero that Marlene was releasing sent even Mason gulping, yet the other man only gave an exaggerated shrug.

“No no, I’m actually scared out of my mind just sitting here. Please, just think of the info as my gift of gratitude for allowing me to have an audience with you.”

“...I admit, it’s quite the *interesting* news.”

There were two small countries, their histories still young, on a tiny continent to the northwest of the Central Continent.

Their Saplings had been destroyed.

The vast majority had believed it to be an attack of the Dark Lady Whitehare, but the true culprit had been the demihuman resistance. The group had been composed of elves, dwarves, and beastmen, and their travel had been assisted by aquatic demihumans, the merfolk.

However, while the two countries only had a few tens of thousands of people each, how could only a thousand demihumans have brought down the countries without the help of the Dark Lady?

But if the information brought by the man in front of her was true, then the Hero Gold, the Warrior, had been their vanguard. He himself had broken through the castle gates and destroyed the Sapling.

Even Marlene could not believe it at first, but the man had brought proof. He'd shown her the images captured in a state-of-the-art magitool, and she had had no choice but to accept the truth.

Gold was a man who loathed hurting the citizens. Why would he turn his sword against those very same people?

The attack had gone with surprisingly low casualties, as a matter of fact. Their goal had been only the release of the demihuman slaves and the destruction of the Sapling. Yet considering the fact that such important news had still not yet reached the wider world, she could assume that the vast majority of the survivors were having trouble even just evacuating. The continent was high up north, and with the Saplings gone, they must have returned to being an icy wasteland.

It was a simple conclusion. Marlene could easily imagine the outcome just by hearing what had happened, so there was no reason Gold couldn't have.

The face of the uncouth man flashed through her mind. Maybe there was something he had to do even if he had to sacrifice the many for it, she thought.

It was info that she could acquire sooner or later. But if a Hero had switched allegiance to the Dark Lady's side, then it would be a huge change in the current balance of powers.

Before, the humans only needed to worry about the Dark Lady, who always acted alone. The demihumans were a nuisance, but only that: just a nuisance. Yet now, with another force capable of destroying Saplings that wasn't the Dark Lady, human countries would need their security to be several times more stringent than it was at the moment.

The Western Continent where she was also had a Dark General, the Orc King. If they all came to attack, even Marlene would find it too much to handle. Early information was worth tens of thousands of gold coins.

“So then, what do you want of me? I'm still not done with the mana absorption magic circle.”

“We thank you for your consideration, but it is not yet necessary. Just the mobile storage of mana and magical signal detection you have given us were more than useful enough.”

“It's fine. I got my payment.”

As a reward for completing two of the Temples' requested spells, Marlene had been given fifty of the newest model of rapid-fire magic guns, as well as thirty thousand rounds of ammunition.

“Then... do you want me to give you the Dark Lady's head?”

The man chuckled. “Oh no, I would prefer it if I was allowed to take the Bunny's life myself, if possible. No, what we wish to request of you is a summoning circle to call upon the Fairy King.”

“...the Fairy King.”

The Fairy King was even mentioned in the nursery tales of this world. Legend had it that there was a 'Fairy World'

separate from this material world, and that the Fairy King and Fairy Queen lived there.

Did this man truly believe the stories to be real? Yet it was a fact that the man in front of her had summoned the dark pixies throughout the whole world in his belief. He was the source of the current chaos.

And of course, Marlene too had received a request to hunt for the mastermind. He knew of it, and yet the man still dared to show up in front of her with so much nonchalance. He even began to negotiate.

But his daring was exactly what caught Marlene's interest.

"What'll I get?"

"Complete cooperation from the Temples. Supply of human resources. Information about the other Heroes. Blackmail of royalty and nobility of this country and others. How about it?"

Marlene slowly nodded.

If the Fairy King, or at least something similar, truly existed, then she was at least a little interested in witnessing what would become of the man's wish to this existence.

"All right. One last thing, then. Would my *partner in crime* mind letting me see his face? Show me, mister Brian, mastermind of the dark pixie incident."

The man silently removed his hood, revealing the demented grin of a madman, his undeniably artificial eyes of black machinery laid bare, untouched by any VR alteration.

Chapter 75 TO BE CALLED A DEMON

The project to research the 'Applications and Uses of Technologies and Resources of Yggdrasia', done under the auspices of the government of a certain country, was bearing fruit after decades of work and a ludicrous amount of funding. Its progress could be roughly summarized into stages as follows:

The first stage, information gathering through the dispatch of watcher drones and stabilization of the local area.

The second stage, acquisition and genetic analysis of people with paranormal abilities who were linked to the discovery of the new world.

The third stage, development of a mana gathering system that made use of the aforementioned genetic data.

The fourth stage, development of a basic theory to create avatars that were growth-capable with mana.

The resulting large-scale mana gathering system had been the VRMMO *World of Yggdrasia*. The game project had proceeded without

a hitch. Through the use of around three million players as ‘miners’, extraction of the new world’s resources and development of magical weaponry had begun.

But the corporation had encountered a large obstacle even before a year had passed.

The genetic analysis of one hundred children with paranormal abilities had been completed, and they were deemed no longer useful. They had been sent to the other world as test subjects for the experimental monster avatars, and at the same time to be disposed of.

The experiment had ended with all the test subjects either dead or crippled. The results had been used to develop militarized monster avatars. However, just as they were beginning their test runs, an incident happened.

The destruction of a medical facility and the mass murder of its staff, apparently done by a single *girl*.

She had also been witnessed in Yggdrasia, and was suspected to be the ‘rabbit’ beastman girl with abnormal combat power. Her appearance on Earth had shocked all those involved.

The scholars and researchers had determined that she either had a power to allow her to travel across dimensions, or a power to Digistruct herself here from the other world.

In case of the former, then if they could analyze her power, they would possibly gain the capability to transport not just mana, but also resources such as the rare metal ‘mythril’ and ‘adamantite’ back to Earth. Even in case of the latter, she would still give them the possibility of mass mana collection. The government had ordered the corporation to either capture her or analyze her genetic information. However, they soon found out that she was powerful enough to be called the Dark Lady in Yggdrasia. Their progress stalled.

And one day, the corporation’s center of research into the new world was attacked.

The 12th research center had been the base of the game developers, as well as where the players-slash-resource-miners were being managed. All of their security staff had been killed. The culprit had slipped

through the stringent security and surveillance system, leaving no traces of themselves. The attack had earned them the nickname of 'The Ghost'.

No one knew if the culprit was a singular person or a group. As the corporation continued their investigation with the assumption that it had been done by a foreign special task force with the purpose of industrial espionage, the 4th research center, where magical weaponry were being developed, fell. Not only were all of their main researchers murdered and their facilities destroyed, the fifty soldiers on-loan to the center for operational testing had also gone missing. As a result, the government then revised their assumption of the Ghost's goal to be 'information of the other world'. They gave the order for the army to protect the remaining research centers.

Yet their efforts might as well have been a joke in front of the Ghost, who had gone through the security like a hot knife through butter, killing hundreds of soldiers and researchers of the 7th center. However, the Ghost's identity had been revealed by the remaining records.

It was the Dark Lady of the other world, alias Whitehare.

There were unconfirmed rumors that Whitehare bore a striking resemblance to one of the former secret alpha test subjects, a girl with a paranormal ability: No. 13.

No. 13 had been a girl with a congenital pigment deficiency. Her father was unknown, her mother a woman with Japanese heritage. When she was eleven years and one month old, her identity was erased from official records, and she entered the other world as a test subject.

No. 13 had suffered a psyche collapse and fell into a vegetative state due to an *accident* during the test. She had survived by unknown means, and was thought to be planning her vengeance against the corporation.

Her power was to 'cause misfortune in others', and so she was called the Demon Child.

Yet even through mental stress caused by abuse that at times bordered on being torture, she still showed no signs of gaining the power of Probability Manipulation that the corporation was hoping for, and she had been designated for disposal. She was hypothesized to have

awakened a new, unknown ability through her psyche collapse and the mana of the new world.

The 7th research center had reported her power to be unfathomable, and her threat level extremely dangerous. But the corporation had analyzed her total combat power from the camera footage of the time she attacked the medical facility; they had deemed it to be around ten thousand, and as only several months had passed, they assumed her power could have only increased by 50% at most.

However, she had shown personal power equivalent to a battalion of tanks, as well as abilities of Probability Manipulation and Frost. The corporation found itself in a hurry to devise countermeasures.

The Ghost was now redesignated as Whitehare. As she had destroyed the 4th and the 7th research center yet leaving the 12th intact, the corporation now believed her goal to not be ‘facilities connected to the other world’, but instead ‘mana-extracting facilities’.

The extraction and storage of mana required large-scale equipment. Thus, there were only three locations that held them.

Two of them had been the 4th and the 7th research center, and the final was a military compound.

Currently, the plans for the equipment that had been placed at the two research centers, as well as the researchers who had designed them, had all perished. Any reconstruction efforts would require the remaining facility to temporarily cease operation to be inspected.

And even if they could manage to finish the inspection, redesign, and operational testing, it would still take them several years. It was why the final location *must* be defended, no matter how many lives they might need to sacrifice. The military compound was preparing for Whitehare’s assault with a division of soldiers.

“Do *not* let her get in!!! Fuck that little white bitch up *good*! If I don’t see her pumped with more holes than my grandma’s flip-flops, heads are going to ROLL!”

The commander of the compound, brigadier general Hestor, slammed his fist on an expensive-looking table and shouted in apoplectic rage.

His hostility against Whitehare was of a far more personal nature than what was required for someone of his standing.

Hestor's nephew had been one of the officers deployed at the corporation. The young man respected him and had followed in his footsteps, and he himself was very much fond of his nephew.

His nephew would have one day picked up his torch to become an excellent protector of this country, if only he hadn't gone missing at the 4th research center. Hestor still hadn't lost hope, but if his nephew had been caught in the hands of that terribly cruel Whitehare, then his fate was sealed.

Hestor angrily huffed as he finished his outburst. Right at that moment, his young secretary entered the room. He glared.

"What?!"

"Sir! ...umm, the people requested by the government have arrived. What is your order?"

"...them, I see."

Brigadier general Hestor didn't bother hiding his displeasure at the report.

Upon her destruction of the medical facility, Whitehare had called herself a Demon.

Everyone involved had thought it no more than a metaphor, that she was simply declaring her resolve for vengeance. But one of the high-level government officials hearing it had said that they knew some very suitable people, and had so *generously* sent them over as backup.

Several minutes later, three men arrived at Hestor's office from the military helicopter that had brought them here.

"...so you're here."

One was a lanky man around thirty years of age, wearing a black cloak and a pair of round sunglasses.

One was an American Indian man, old and muscular, his cheeks bearing strange tattoos.

And one was a white-haired middle-aged priest, with an average build and a gentle smile.

They belonged to an organization that only unofficially existed, which the government employed to deal with ‘special’

jobs. They were modern *mag*es.

Around a thousand years ago, mana still existed on Earth. At the time, there had been ‘witches’ and ‘wizards’, people with the capability to bring about supernatural phenomena, though they had never shown themselves in the spotlight.

But as mana gradually vanished from the world, so too did the number of these practitioners drastically decreased. Some had survived by joining hands with influential men and women of the time, and they continued to develop their unique skills.

The man wearing sunglasses was named Herdu. A practitioner of an Eastern European school of black magic, he sacrificed living beings instead of using magic power, using the life force of their death throes to power his Spells.

The American Indian man, Ohan. He utilized the life force of himself and of his surroundings as ‘qi’ to do Shamanism.

The middle-aged priest, Aiden. He was said to be a Saint who had succeeded in drawing out power from the soul by honing his own. He made his living as an exorcist.

“You know what the *job* is, correct?”

Hestor said bluntly, his misgivings plain to see in his gaze. Herdu merrily replied.

“They said a demon’s shown up? Awesome. I’ve always wanted to meet a real one.”

“...exterminating demons is my duty,” Ohan said.

“Indeed, it is what we have been told. How wonderful that a demon has appeared. This is undeniable proof that God existed!” And Aiden was the last to speak.

Despite the disbelief Hestor held upon hearing their words, he thought

he'd seen an unfathomable *flame* in their eyes. He decided on a somewhat lighter approach.

"...I would like you to guard the hallway leading to the crucial facilities and the control room. Ask the soldiers to guide you. I've left the nearby room empty, so feel free to use it as you wish," Hestor said.

The three men gave their responses and left the room. Hestor collapsed onto the black leather chair and sighed deeply.

"Goddamn are they freaky..."

With the force he had, he couldn't possibly need their help.

Yet if the worst *did* happen, then he wouldn't have a single idea what the three men would do. Hestor consoled himself by subjecting the meddling government high official to the worst obscenities his mind could cook up.

He couldn't show those government officials any real-time footage due to informational security. So he could only make sure to compile some footage with *extra* info afterward to vindicate himself before them.

Several days later. The report that he had been, in a way, looking *forward* to finally arrived.

"Whitehare has appeared!"

So you're finally here, Hestor thought, his hurried footsteps carrying him to the control center. His hand formed a fist in unconscious tension.

Whitehare possessed four noteworthy powers.

First, her invisibility to the *eyes* of digital equipment. This was solved by simply using real human eyes and the decrepit technology of analog filming.

Second, her physical capabilities that allowed her to move several times faster than a human could. The countermeasure had been extra training in aiming without digital equipment and training movement perception for his soldiers.

Third, her mist of extreme cold. All his soldiers were equipped with cold weather gear that allowed them to be active even in minus-50

degrees Celsius environment.

Fourth, as well as the most dangerous, was her Probability Manipulation. It was proposed that this ability was also what granted her long-range capability. In theory, they should be able to deal with it by not allowing her a chance to attack at all, sending so many bullets downrange that she wouldn't be able to keep up with her ability.

He arrived at the war room. A monitor was hastily prepared to display analog footage. On the screen, the yellow earth, normally scoured by a dry wind, was now being covered by a white mist. The air temperature dropped drastically. Vision was bad, but not completely blinding.

Within the mist, a girl of white appeared in absolute composure. Whitehare was here.

She must have made her entrance knowing that her identity was now exposed. But no one expected her to simply walk through the front gates as if she owned the place.

Hestor saw her for the first time. Before he knew it, his eyes were wide open.

Whitehare was an adorable girl in her mid-teens with scarlet eyes, pure-white hair, and astonishingly white skin. She was clad in an outfit resembling that of a bunny girl's, which left her shoulders and arms exposed. Her bunched-up short skirt and her pair of rabbit ears, no less adorable, bounced and swayed in concert.

Whitehare noticed the gaze of the soldiers. She gave a shy smile, fingers pinching the hem of her skirt to give a curtsy.

She looked so relaxed, so lovely, as if she was a character straight out of an animated movie. The field officer, captivated by the sight of the girl, even forgot to give the order to shoot. Hestor jolted back to reality with a gasp, and his furious order rang out in the command center.

“What the fuck are you doing?! SHOOT HER!!”

After a moment's delay, tens of thousands of bullets rained down on her.

According to the scholars and researchers, her Probability Manipulation only applied to a single target at a time. It wasn't unbeatable. *If you can dodge all of them, I'd like to see you try*, Hestor thought, his eyes glued to the screen.

Abruptly, she disappeared.

"...huh?" Hestor unwittingly exclaimed in stupefaction.

Screams rang out the very next moment, the screen shaking frantically. Then he heard the report. The artillery unit of sixty soldiers situated several hundred meters away had all been transformed into ice, cold-weather gear and all. There were no survivors.

Howls of rage, of terror, of gunshots and explosions followed one after another.

"What the hell is happening?!"

At the moment, the screen was showing footage of what a soldier was manually filming instead of AI-driven surveillance cameras. It was why Whitehare was outrunning the camera.

Hestor needed to get an image of the battlefield, anything at all. He switched the wall monitor to display the digital footage of surveillance cameras. High firepower units like the tanks were being disabled and frozen in pinpoint strikes.

But something else held his attention: a unit of soldiers was showing a notable lack of unity. He questioned the field officer, and the officer had looked uncomfortable. The report was no less strange.

"S-sir... a group of soldiers suddenly started saying 'the Bunny' and some other nonsense, and they seem extremely confused..."

"Fucking IDIOTS!!!"

Of those among his soldiers who'd seen Whitehare, some were confused, some excited. They were made *useless*.

Admittedly, the younger soldiers might have found it difficult to fire on such a lovely girl without a single moment of hesitation, but they were still trained soldiers. Was this the power of the other world's Dark Lady, to have disabled them so easily? His spine chilled with the

thought.

“Get the camera team on the heli!”

First and foremost, he needed to confirm Whitehare’s location before he could have a grasp of the situation. Several of the anti-tank helicopters, until now only standing by due to the unavailability of the electronic system, took to the air and began to send overhead footage of the battlefield.

The unit equipped with power armor was standing stock-still in a white wasteland like rows of frozen trees, their armor unresponsive, ice completely encasing them. Whitehare took notice of the helicopters. She turned her hand toward them and made as if to crush *something* in her fist.

Hestor reeled back despite himself, squeaking in fear, feeling as if her eyes had looked straight at him. The man himself was fine, but the officers watching the digital monitors around him had all collapsed, blood erupting from all over their bodies. The filming helicopter failed to keep themselves aloft, every single one crashing to the ground. The screens went black.

After I finished dealing with all the units equipped with heavy weapons and magic weapons, I poured magic power into the cold mist I’d spread throughout the area and turned it into a blizzard.

They were so *annoyingly* prepared against the cold. They wouldn’t die, but the remaining were pretty much just foot soldiers, so they probably wouldn’t be able to move for quite a while.

As I expected, fighting head-on really took a chunk out of my reserve. I’d refilled with the mana storage tank I found when I was smashing up the 7th research center, but I still spent nearly twenty thousand of my magic power.

Still, if this was the best they could bring against me, then Yggdrasia’s countries were still more dangerous.

There weren’t many units equipped with magic weapons. Perhaps the normal soldiers still hadn’t been informed about me, or perhaps they

just didn't have enough of the weapons.

"Well then."

I set the freezing blizzard to last for a while. I took information from the device of one of the soldiers, and I headed to the facility that held my objective.

A tenacious soldier still tried to train his gun on me even when ice already invaded half his body, and my straight sword cut off his head, sending him to rest. My elbow pierced through the thick steel door.

I continued going deeper inside, mowing down the occasional magic-weapon-wielding foot soldiers. I came to a wide, straight-running hallway that would lead me further in. A strange sunglasses-wearing man was waiting for me, blocking my path.

"Hmm, so you're the demon?"

"Hmm, so you're the demon?"

The equipment to bridge the gap between Earth and the new world of Yggdrasia, as well as the mana-gathering and mana-storage systems, were located within a military compound. The hallway that would lead me there was also the one

connected to the command center where the military generals were. A *very* strange man wearing round sunglasses and a black cloak was lying in wait for me in the hallway.

How odd, to see just a single person here... no, wait, he was accompanied by a pack of dirty stray dogs behind him.

But this was weird. I wasn't exactly indiscriminately throwing around my demonic magical power around the place all the time, but I also wasn't suppressing my racial skill of **[Fear]**.

Perhaps the man was resisting it the way some trained knights and soldiers could, but that pack of stray dogs should only be normal animals. Yet not only did they show not a lick of fear, they were even baring their teeth and growling at me, looking obviously, unnaturally hostile.

Was it hypnosis? Or drugs?

[Sunglasses-Wearing Man] [Race: Human

] [Weirdo]

[Magic Points (MP): 5/5] [Hit Points (HP): 110/110]

[Total Combat Power: 182]

Just a normal human, although his combat power was quite high considering. Perhaps he knew some sort of martial art, and I was sure the other factor was the magic power he possessed, even if he barely had any.

He shouldn't be a problem to me in terms of combat power, but I still didn't know who he was. I narrowed my eyes at him, and he took an exaggerated step backward.

"Ooooh, now that's scary. Thought you were just a cute little lady, who knew you were a demon? Look, I'm getting goosebumps."

As the man rolled up his sleeves to show me, he suddenly whipped out an oddly-shaped knife that looked like a bolt of lightning, using it to cut into one of the dogs next to him.

"Go."

The wounded dog leaped forward without even a single whimper. It came in contact with my mist and immediately froze in mid-air, the ice sculpture sailing past my side.

"...what were you trying to do?"

He chuckled. "Oh, I've *just* finished my preparations."

Right then, what looked like some fog burst out from the frozen dog and flew into the man.

I sensed a sudden outpouring of something similar to magic power from him, and I took a reflexive half-step dodge. The wooden door and the frozen dog diagonally behind me began to be invaded with greyness at visible speed.

Wait a minute, is this...

"...petrification?"

"Cor-rect! Amazing, I've never seen anyone managing to dodge it right

on the first time!”

What did he do? Even in Yggdrasia, only certain monsters have the ability of petrification. It wasn't something Earth's technology could replicate.

“Who are you...?”

“My, sorry for the late introduction. My name's Herdu, and I come from a long-established line of Czech black mages. If you're a real demon, you should know the mages of old, right? Tell me who's better, me or them?”

As he gave his introduction, he stabbed his knife deep into the neck of another nearby dog. Herdu smirked even as the spurting blood smeared his face, and he once more absorbed *something*.

[Sunglasses-wearing Man] [Race: Human

] [Black Mage]

[Magic Points (MP): 50/5] [Hit Points (HP): 110/110]

[Total Combat Power: 182]

He was holding more magic than his limit... I see. He was probably forcibly turning the lifeforce of other living beings into his own magic power.

He was one of the Earthborn mages. These people must have done a lot of experimentation to leave behind their magecraft in a world that no longer had mana. The way they do magic was fundamentally different from people in Yggdrasia.

But you know...

“Can you dodge this time?”

Herdu once more fired his chantless spell. His magic power was absorbed into the wall, then suddenly reappearing on top of my head.

I just swung my hand to whack it off-course.

“...huh?” Herdu gaped in disbelief.

I brushed off the stony powder sticking on my glove, as if they were nothing more than dust.

“...tsk, tricks,” Herdu said, slashing into several more dogs in succession, killing one and only lightly wounding two others. As the two wounded dogs dashed towards me, at the same time, Herdu also shot his spell with the magic power he gained from his kill.

I didn't dodge. A single swing of my arm flung both the flying spell and the attacking dogs away. Herdu's face twisted in shock as he saw what I did.

“Haahhh?!”

The spell composition was interesting, and I thought it could be quite effective depending on how it's used. It would have been dangerous to me if I'd still been a Low Demon.

But you know, there's a fundamental problem... you're using way too little magic.

Since he'd been killing every single time he used his spell, he must not be able to store the magic gained from the life force of others. The maximum amount of magic power Herdu could use at any one time was likely to be only 50.

Upon the sight of his spells being so easily parried, he began to lose his composure, his face twitching.

“W-who the hell are you?!”

“Who? Didn't you already say it yourself just a while ago?”

Or perhaps... he didn't *actually* think I was a demon?

He recalled his words, and his face rapidly paled. He once more prepared to raise his knife against the defenseless strays, perhaps in a last-ditch attempt to struggle, perhaps to run away. I stretched out my hand and squeezed.

crack!

His knife shattered, the stress suddenly too much for it. His spell composition *unluckily* unraveled, and his limbs began to turn gray

from their tips, turning into stone.

Herdu screamed and wailed, tormented by the backlash of the black Curse magic. I leisurely walked close to him. He tumbled on the floor, trying to get away, his legs already failing him.

“...where are you going?”

“W-wait, please wait! I-I can give you money... I mean people! Animals! I can give you as many lives as you want! Yes, you’re a real demon, right?! M-make a contract with me. I know! I know demons can’t unleash their true strength in the mortal world without a Contract with a human!”

What the hell was he saying? Didn’t he see how I dealt with the army outside?

“That’s right! With a contract with you, I’ll become the greatest mage in this world! Once I do, I’ll give you as many souls as you want! Kids, women, whatever you want!”

“I see...”

So he would make children into living sacrifices. To *me*.

“Unfortunate for you, I already have the best *contractor*. Cheap souls like yours aren’t worth my time.”

I gently touched the fingers of my hands together and *crushed* my palms against each other. The stray dogs he had been controlling until now abruptly regained their senses. They stood stock-still for a moment in blank shock, then they began to growl hungrily at me and Herdu.

The stray dogs didn’t attack me, *fearing* me. But Herdu was right there, his arms and legs petrified.

I walked past the crawling man. He called after me in panic.

“H-hey, wait...”

“Sorry. I’m in a hurry.”

I ran to the end of the corridor. I heard sounds of growling, of fighting behind me, and a short while later, the dying screams of the man who called himself Herdu echoed in the compound.

*

After a while, the hallway widened. There was a vending machine and a bench. A giant man, advanced in years, was drinking from a small can. He quietly turned around upon noticing me.

“The spirits of virtue are astir. I see your true face, evil spirit wearing human skin. This is the world of man. Return to hell where you belong, dark one.”

The old giant said, stretching out his hand that held the can with the words ‘RED BEAN SOUP’ written on it toward me.

Then he squeezed, and the steel can folded like wet paper.

‘Spirits of virtue’? Earth had so little mana even I, an archdemon, was finding it difficult to stay here. There was no way the elementals holing up in the spirit world would show up.

Seemed like this old man was also an Earthborn *mage* like Herdu. He seemed slightly different, though. He could see that I was a Demon right away.

[Huge Old Man] [Race: Human

] [Shaman]

[Magic Points (MP): 3/3] [Hit Points (HP): 130/130]

[Total Combat Power: 144]

The old man took out a tree branch, leaves still attached, and began chanting some sort of incantation.

“—O’ spirits, grant me the power to repel evil!”

In response to his call, what looked like three balls of light floated out from the tree branch.

Hmm... that was surprising. He actually called up real elementals.

Weak and so immature they might as well be babies, but real elementals all the same.

But the spirits had been forced to appear in a world without magic, and their very existence was eroding by the seconds.

Even their weak magic was being absorbed by the old man. They were beginning to peter out.

“My name is Ohan. Dark spirit, you shall perish before our virtuous power!”

“—**Leave**—”

I said, putting magic power into my **voice**. The elementals were forcefully sent back in an instant.

“...huh?” Suddenly losing the power of the spirits that he had *stolen*, the old man shrunk into a size smaller, as though he had also lost a part of his life force at the same time. He staggered, falling onto his knees. My claws gripped his head.

“...did you not hear their *screams*?”

The old man froze in terror. I took all his life force and his heat, then crushed the shriveled frozen head into dust.

“So that’s what the Earth mages are doing...”

In a world without mana, the techniques they were leaving behind were those that stole power from others.

If this continued, this world would be heading towards destruction like Yggdrasia, too. But with the power I had at the moment, I couldn’t stop it *yet*.

There was something else I should be doing instead. I continued deeper down the hallway.

Some time later, a double door appeared in my view.

I felt the presence of only a single person inside. I carefully opened the door, watching for any more ‘mages’. I didn’t know what room it had been originally, but right now it had an ‘altar’ made out of stacking

tables covered with cloth. It looked like a *chapel*.

There was a priest praying to the cross set on the altar, his back turned to me. He slowly stood up and turned around, greeting me with the gentle smile of an old Father.

“Greetings, demon.”

[Middle-Aged Priest] [Race: Human

] [Saint]

[Magic Points (MP): 150/150] [Hit Points (HP): 250/250]

[Total Combat Power: 840]

This guy... he’s a little *different*.

Standing in front of me was a priest, a warm smile adorning his face.

But he was no normal person. His magic power and combat power were both quite high. In Yggdrasia, he would have been a Rank 4 or Rank 5. People with such power weren’t all that rare among the players and the senior knights, but this was Earth, a planet without mana. How had he gained such magic power?

[Middle-Aged Priest] [Race: Human

] [Saint]

[Magic Points (MP): 150/150] [Hit Points (HP): 250/250]

[Total Combat Power: 840]

‘Saint’...? The skill Identification quantified the information about my target that I perceived through my senses and magic, then showed the results to me. Thus, the impression that I had of the target could affect the information that the skill displayed.

I’d always thought that as I was a monster, my Identification results were more accurate than a human with their inferior sensory organs.

Either the impression I had upon seeing him had named him a Saint, or the instincts that I had as a demon was telling me so.

“... *what* are you?” I narrowed my eyes in wariness and asked.

His smile only became bigger.

“My name is Aiden, a man of the cloth. Ahh, demon, I have been waiting so long to talk with you. Come, come, let me prepare you some tea.”

As Aiden was about to move to the table, I asked.

“Aren’t you a priest? Why do you believe in the existence of demons?”

He turned around with a beaming smile.

“Indeed, indeed I do. The existence of evil demons is what proved the existence of the good God, after all.”

I had no idea what he was saying. I *was* curious about who he truly was, but I had a feeling I wouldn’t be able to hold a conversation with someone that might as well be advocating that even demons were the creation of God.

Yet just as I was about to go deeper into the facility, ignoring Aiden, a sudden attack came from my back that held not a single whiff of killing intent. I immediately blocked with my fist and retreated.

“...you want to fight?”

The edge of the glove on my left hand, the one I’d used to block, was crumbling into particles of light.

...could this be... the power of a Hero? No, not quite. It was similar to the power that Gold Hero guy had used, but the elementals couldn’t exist here on Earth. There was no way Aiden could have received an elemental’s Blessing.

Aiden, unchanging smile on his face even as he’d attacked, made the sign of the cross on his chest and replied.

“Hear me, demon... If you are still intent on corrupting the world of Man, then as a devout follower of God, I shall not allow you to transgress any further. Repent, demon. Receive my purification, and your sins shall be absolved.”

He’d absolve a demon? He wasn’t even God, just a normal human. Was he really saying that? He even used the words

“the world of Man” despite proclaiming himself a follower of God. Was *this* the humans’ own sin, then?

So anyway, he wasn’t giving me a choice here, was he?

Aiden’s muscles bulged under his vestment, cloth straining against his skin. Was it a sort of body reinforcement? Curious, but if he wasn’t willing to listen, then I had no reason to let him live.

“Ready yourself!”

Aiden let loose a merciless fist. His blow looked quite a bit sharper than what his combat power suggested. As I expected, skills installed into avatars were a far cry from skills gained with real experience.

I still had far more combat power though. I effortlessly stopped his fist, grabbing it with my hand. But just as I was about to freeze him with the contact, a powerful light shone from his fist. At the same time, I felt his soul surging.

He gave a cry of sustained effort, and my grasp on his fist was repelled. For a single instant, I certainly felt power equivalent to that of a Hero’s from Aiden.

But there was something more important. I had an inkling of what the source of that power was.

“...so you’re burning your own soul to gain power, is it?”

While I might have become a demon, I was an artificial one. I wasn’t all that well-versed in matters of the soul.

But the World Tree had told me about the reason for the soul’s existence. With the knowledge, I could see how *sinful* it was to turn your own soul into power.

“Indeed, demon. To be closer to the teachings of God, I have trained myself for many decades, and I have finally reached the truth! I have been granted the power to create *miracles*!” Aiden replied, sounding enraptured.

“...even if your soul disappear for it?”

“Such a foolish question. It is exactly the moment that I shall be

released from the impure flesh, when God shall welcome me to His side!”

Now that? That made him *interesting* to me.

Perhaps it was my demonic instincts talking. My soul, the soul of a girl who’d become a demon, was whispering to me, saying it wanted to *corrupt* Aiden’s own soul, so ignorant, so innocent.

“Then I’ll tell you the *truth*...”

“Spare me your deception!”

Aiden charged toward me, once more burning parts of his soul. Even if he could approach the strength of a true Hero in just an instant, I still had nearly ten times his combat power. I fended off his attacks, slamming him onto the ground, and I stabbed my scarlet claws into his forehead.

“**[Dimensional Manipulation]**”

The evolved skill could now affect space itself instead of just electronics. And my power to manipulate electrons was no longer limited to the digital world — I could now even interfere with the faint bioelectricity that all living beings possessed.

It should work. Theoretically. I turned a part of my own memory into digital information, turning it visual, and directly poured it into Aiden’s brain.

He screamed in pure anguish. Blood streamed from his eyes and nose.

After the ‘video’ finished playing, Aiden lay still, deathly silent. Several minutes later, he slowly stood up, looking at me with the fearful eyes of a child.

“You know what you need to *do*, right?”

“Yes...”

Souls of living beings who had died were gathered by the World Tree. Souls that had earned a lot of experience would get a part of it recycled to the world, while they kept the rest to be reincarnated. Evil

souls were dropped into the Abyss. The rest of the souls would be recycled into the world, reborn as a completely new life.

And souls with especially high amounts of experience would transcend into elemental spirits, to carry life throughout the world.

The life force of the recycled souls were 'mana'. As mana filled up the whole world, it allowed the elemental spirits, who served as red blood cells to carry life to every corner of the world, and the demons, who served as white blood cells to kill evil souls, to exist.

But in Yggdrasia, the human race was consuming that mana without limits, and the corporation of Earth was stealing it away. It was what had set the world on the path to destruction.

Earth, a world that had lost its mana, was facing the inverse problem. More and more souls were being born without being culled, and on top of that, the humans were even consuming and killing Earth's feeble elementals, the spirits the only thing barely holding apocalypse at bay, in their quest for more power.

Aiden, now aware of the truth, walked out without a word, heavy thoughts apparent on his face.

He would be following my wish, I was sure. He would leave to hunt down the magicians who were toying with souls and spirits, those who were going against the world's order.

I could see his soul, formerly pure to the point of foolishness, slowly beginning to blacken with his newfound knowledge.

The presence of life deeper inside became much clearer to my senses, as if a blanket of fog hiding it was now gone.

Maybe those three magicians had had something to do with it.

Two soldiers were standing in front of a door mid-way through the hallway. It looked like it was the command center. I felt the presence of several people inside.

The end of the hallway led to the mana-collection facility. Once I smashed it, the corporation and the government's effort to gather mana from Yggdrasia would be set back a decade.

If I wanted them to back off completely, though, I'd have to do

something about this country and its government itself. I should be able to buy enough time for me to gain the power I needed to fight off the whole of Earth.

Reaffirming my resolve, I ran down the corridor.

“T-Target sighted! It’s Whitehare!”

“Fire at will! Kill her!”

The two fully-equipped soldiers in front of the door fired their assault rifles, probably magical. They covered the hallway with bullets.

I immediately transformed completely into mist to get through them with minimal damage. I reached the soldiers, instantly freezing them. My claws in human form shattered the ice statues.

The door of alloyed metal was half-frozen, submerged in air so cold diamond dust was forming. I put all my strength into an elbow smash and slammed into it, the impact heavy and echoing.

The combat power of a demon was calculated from magic power, so it changed depending on what my status was at the time. All the same, I imagined that if my status was converted to a normal living being’s, I should be able to get at least 300 Strength.

A few more strikes forced the bent door to open up for me. Inside, military operators were breathing out white air, looking half-frozen already. Looked like the cold mist I let out previously had already permeated the room.

They fired their guns. I instantly tore apart their necks with my knife, the final survivor being a commander who was trying to contact someone.

“D-damn you...” he sputtered.

I ignored him to give a demure curtsy to the large wall monitor. On-screen was a man whose face even I knew.

“Hey there, Mr. President. What’s up?”

Chapter 78 GODDESS FROM THE MACHINE — DEA EX MACHINA

“Hey there, Mr. President. What’s up?”

The kind-looking old man on the large screen faintly raised an eyebrow upon my candor.

The President. The person with the most executive power in this country, as well as the commander-in-chief of the military. *Everyone* knew of him. Even test subjects of human experiments who had had their official records erased, like me, knew of him.

“You bitch...!”

The irreverent greeting apparently didn’t sit very well with the commander of the compound. I leisurely stretched my hand toward him and squeezed. He spat out blood and collapsed on his knee, his organs *suddenly* sickly .

The man in his early fifties on the screen stayed implacable with his smile. He didn’t even blink at the supernatural sight.

“Hey yourself, cute little bunny lady. You’re No. 13, correct?”

“Close enough.”

While I might not care to be called by the human name that I’d long since abandoned, these people just kept using ‘No.

13’ *all the time*. Did they think that those in this country who no longer had a family register didn’t deserve a name? Or had they been seeing me as nothing more than a guinea pig from the very start?

The man slowly nodded. He clasped his hands on the table, fingers interlocked, and leaned deeply back on his chair.

“You don’t show up on digital footage, but you do on this screen, luckily. I’ve seen your battles. Just the damage reports alone were more than enough to tell me how amazing your power is.”

“Thanks for the compliment.”

What was his preamble leading up to? After a while, he began his talk with a politician’s smile, his motions exaggerated as if he was making

a public speech.

"I'll get straight to the point. I want you."

"..."

"I believe we can work together. Join me, and I will give you everything you want. Status. Honor. Fame. Money. Or perhaps you'd like a date with a Hollywood star like girls your age? With my authority, I can give you any lover you want. If you have religious problems, then I can ask that country to issue you 'indulgences' by the dozens. And if you really need to fill your stomach, you can get death-row inmates on a regular schedule. Ah, but spare my wife and citizens, alright?" The man chuckled.

"...why would you offer so much?"

He seemed to have taken my response as me sitting down on the negotiations table, if only tentatively. He enthusiastically began his presentation as though he was talking to another world leader.

"You are the perfection we seek. With the use of mana, the infinite energy of the new world, and an Avatar incorporated abilities of paranormal humans, you have passed through evolutions after evolutions to become the ultimate weapon! The militarized monster avatars had been the greatest dream of the researchers ever since they knew of the existence of the

new world and mana, and you are the ultimate conclusion! You are a goddess from the machine. You are Dea ex Machina !"

"..."

"Wield your extraordinary power! You shall play the part of the Dark Lady as you have done on Yggdrasia, and you will reign as the Evil of Earth. You will justify our nation's conquest of the world. The eastern countries will inevitably oppose us, and you will annihilate them as the Dark Lady. You will lead an army of militarized monster avatars numbering tens of thousands, all controlled by the best of my soldiers! Your mother may have been an immigrant, but she is one of my people all the same. And even if you're no longer officially a citizen of ours, your patriotism must surely still be alive!

Come, join me! You are... you are..."

As the rapturous man stared at me, slowly, his expression transformed into one of shock.

Color receded from my white skin, turning it into an inhuman alabaster. Crimson escaped from my pupils to invade the whole of my eyes. Blood-red fangs grew to peek out from my lips. White miasma of biting cold overflowed from my body. The fear-paralyzed commander near me froze and *rotted*, himself still conscious throughout it all.

“...a Demon...”

The man on the screen whispered, his voice shivering.

He *really* underestimated me, I see... I could see the figures of several guards wearing black and some people who seemed to be his secretaries reflected in his wide-open eyes of shock.

I gently stretched out my hands toward the people I saw in his eyes and joined my fingers, enveloping them all in my palms, and I whispered.

“Causality Alteration, Dimensional Manipulation, parallel activation.”

Then my hands slammed against each other.

“— [Gospel] —”

In that instant, the man on-screen opened wide his eyes in surprise. The people in his sight crumbled as chunks of blood and meat, as *all the healed afflictions of their lives suddenly relapsed in their terminal stages*.

In his youth, he had once been in an apprenticeship to a secretary of his father who had still been a politician at the time, whose torch he would eventually take up for his own. Back then, his father had told him about a national secret: the discovery of a new world.

It had been a matter of utmost secrecy. Holders of the secret weren't

even allowed to tell their family. He had been grateful for the love his father had shown him in telling him, and at the same time, disappointed by the naivete his old man had displayed as a politician.

Ten years later, as a government official, he had earned the position to participate in the development project of the new world, Yggdrasia.

The new world had fascinated him. There were dragons, griffons, monsters of legend. There was the power of ‘magic’

that allowed mortal humans to create miracles. If such legends had remained even on Earth, then it was entirely possible an actual god could exist on Yggdrasia.

And now, as the President of this country, he had seen a Goddess, and she was a Demon.

Upon developing mana-based weaponry, it had been him who had proposed to use inhuman avatars in the form of monsters instead of creating weapons for human use.

He wanted to see a being that transcended humans. He wanted to see an existence that could absorb the lifeforce of their defeated enemies, gaining power without limits. Yet the test models of monster avatars were *only* somewhat more strategically useful than the current weapon technology. It hadn’t been what he was looking for.

But then, she appeared.

She was the ultimate perfection, the dream that he, that all his researchers shared.

She was the absolute weapon, the Goddess that proclaimed herself a Demon.

“...a Demon...” He unwittingly let loose a whisper upon the sight.

The girl of white with a pair of rabbit ears on the screen was being bleached of all colors, crimson eyes and growing blood-red fangs the only exceptions.

He was only looking at her through a screen, and yet he could not stop shivering. He felt as if he’d returned to being a baby.

Join me, he had said, and as if in response, she stretched out her own

two arms and crushed *something* in her hands. He heard her whisper.

—[Gospel]—

In that instant, the secretaries and security staff in his office fell apart into nothing more than blood and flesh.

But that wasn't all. The security system to report any unusual events within the building still detected nothing out of the ordinary, its lights green, while the terminal detecting life signals was displaying a red light for everywhere inside the building except him. Only him.

This was no Good News. This was the herald of a merciless demon.

They'd died. They'd died in a blink of an eye. Inside this building, this stronghold that could withstand even a nuclear attack, everyone beside him had turned into nothing but chunks of meat—

“Mr. President.”

His breath hitched. He was sure her sudden voice had come from the screen, yet he felt as if she was standing behind him, whispering right into his ear.

It was the voice of a young girl, light and airy... and he didn't dare turn around. Cold sweat dripped from his whole body.

His vision darkened.

Was she still there, on the other side of the screen? The presence he felt right behind him was terrifying his very soul.

Waterfalls of sweat poured from all of him. He couldn't even move his eyes from the fear.

“You said I was ‘perfection’ you seek, but I’m still not *perfect*.”

He gulped, feeling as though her sweet breaths were right on his skin.

“I’ll be stronger. Much stronger. Strong enough to defeat this country... no, to wipe out this whole world.”

He gasped.

“Do you want to protect this world?”

“...”

“Then you know what you should do, right? Even if this country was gone, some other one might still try to invade Yggdrasia. You will stop them. You’ll stop them even if you have to go to war with them. Even if you have to risk your own life.”

“...wha...what if...”

What if I can’t? He couldn’t finish his words, but it didn’t matter.

“If you can’t... then I’ll just *break* everything.”

Even if this country stopped its invasion, as long as its people still lived, then information would leak. Another country might just decide to take up the mantle.

The girl was saying that if they did, he would have to stop them however he needed to. With an economic war, or even with military force. He must, else he risked the end of this world by the hand of the Goddess.

The whole of humanity were her hostages.

“It’s a promise, then. A promise between you and me... and a Contract between the President of this country and a Demon.”

I sighed in relief. That was... stressful. I was still just eleven... maybe nearly twelve years old now. This wasn’t the kind of negotiation I should be doing at my age.

I already made my warning just in case, but I didn’t really trust this country that much.

Which was why I didn’t apply my Demon’s Contract to the *individual*, but instead *the president of this country*. Although in the worst case scenario, they might still decide to follow through with their plans even if they had to sacrifice their leader...

Well, whatever. If they follow through with their plans, then I'd just follow through with my threats.

The last thing I needed to do here was destroying the mana-collecting system. I'd listened to my emotions and let loose earlier, so I'd like a chance to refill a bit of my magic.

Besides, I also found a bit of curious info in the phone of that commander back then. An observer had been appointed to watch over the construction of the mana-gathering and mana-utilization system at this compound, and the name was Brian.

...I had no idea what sort of devil's luck he had, to have apparently survived me twice. If he was here, then I needed to make sure he doesn't live this time.

Quarancinq, the City of Magic, a large country situated on the Western Continent of Yggdrasia. Inside the great hall of the country's Tower of Truth, hundreds of black-colored boards, each as large as the length of a man's outstretched arms, were being set into a circular formation as part of the preparations for a new summoning circle.

"So this is what you call a 'monitor screen', is it?" Marlene the Sage, the Heroine of Magic, said, her fingers touching one of the black boards.

The ritual that she had developed in cooperation with Brian, the mastermind behind the dark pixie summoning incident, required them to be in correspondence with their assistants throughout the whole world through the use of these black boards.

Apparently, the black boards were described as 'communicable mirrors of clairvoyance'.

The magitool was so rare that the only people who could get a hand on them were nation leaders, and yet the Temple had prepared for them an inordinate amount just by Brian's say-so. She felt as if she'd had a glimpse into the unfathomable depths of the man.

And at the same time, Marlene was *exhilarated*. She was a magician, a

truth-seeker, and no magicians could possibly contain their excitement in front of the enormous, continent-spanning summoning circle, and the Fairy King that would be summoned by consuming an amount of mana equivalent to that possessed by ten Dark Lords.

Brian was working with one of the black boards, his hood pulled low to cover his eyes. He was making the final adjustments with the person on the screen, a young woman with a constantly-twitching face full of scars.

“Miss Salia, we’re starting on our end. You must be thrilled, aren’t you?”

“Indeed I am, sir Brian! Have no worries, this is practically my own garden.”

“Then I leave it to you.” He chuckled.

Apparently this young Salia woman used to be a noble of Touze Empire. No healing spells had been able to completely cure the frostbite she’d suffered to her face. Twitching nerves had turned her smile as demented as Brian’s own.

“So Brian, are you done preparing?” Marlene called out.

Brian hung up the call. He pulled back his hood, revealing pitch-black artificial eyes surrounded by strange scars, and he cheerfully smiled.

“I am, madam Marlene. We are ready to summon the Fairy King. Once we do, this world shall greet its new sovereign!

The Dark Lady would surely fall by his hands!”

“...indeed. I look forward to it.” Marlene slowly nodded.

She was disquieted, a sense of dread settling in her upon seeing his exuberant grin. She convinced herself it was just his black-colored fake eyes, nothing more.

A/N: The President believed that all of his ordinary citizens were patriotic. He does think there are some politicians who weren’t acting in the interest of the nation, but the politics don’t really have anything to do with the story and it’ll just get really long, so I’m leaving that

part out.

The typical protagonist would probably try to get the truth out about the consequences of the mana exploitation and give the human race a chance to make things right, but not Shedy. She's already "given up on expecting goodness out of mankind", so she's just looking for the *power* to punish the transgressing humans.

The girl of the story is no longer a "human", so she's not going to hesitate to kill people in order to protect a baby animal.

Chapter 79 THE FAIRY KING



After I finished Contracting and Threatening the President of this country — which I'd done just for the sake of it, really

— I headed toward my original objective that had brought me to this compound: the mana collection facility.

It was where the dimensional-crossing equipment and the mana-gathering system were located. Once I destroyed them, I should still be able to buy myself quite some time even if they were reconstructed later.

To those creatures called humans, 'pain' was something very much forgettable. Intimidation was meaningless. The pain would pass from their memory in a blink of an eye, and history would repeat once more.

But if I could buy myself ten years' time, then I could use it to destroy only the Saplings while keeping Yggdrasia's environment as intact as possible. I would be able to grant new lives to all the ninety-nine secret alpha testers. The souls of my comrades would finally get their well-deserved peace...

And my power would surely have grown even further by then. Dealing

with Earth could wait until it happened.

I left the command center and went further down the hallway. The AI-driven automatic self-defense system appeared from the walls and ceiling, apparently detecting noises. They couldn't see me, however, and stayed inactive in malfunctioning confusion. I tore them apart with claws.

As the security system broke down, bulkhead walls began to slam down to block the hallway.

I clicked my tongue and immediately dashed forward, sliding under the first and second walls, slipped through the third as mist, but didn't manage to pass through the fourth. They seemed to be airtight.

My ability to create cold mist could only take away heat, so it wasn't very suited to breaking metals. I could probably use more magic power to force my way through, but my magic was getting low from all those extravagant attacks I'd been doing, so I decided to just take my time breaking the wall.

Well, I said that, but really I only needed a crack so that I could slip through as mist. The walls only delayed me, at best.

"Is this the place?"

After spending about an hour breaking through the walls and further progressing down the hallway, I saw a door that looked even sturdier than the one leading to the command center.

"...also disconnected too, huh."

I couldn't open it through cyberattacks. While my Dimensional Manipulation might allow me to mess with living beings and probably kill AIs from afar, getting it to do what I wanted was still difficult.

No other choice, then. Just going to have to do it the old-fashioned way. As I rubbed my shoulders, loosening my right arm, the closed door slowly opened.

"Hmm?"

Outside of all my expectations, the door unlocked.

But it looked like the people wearing white coats inside the door also shared my surprise. The three, possibly researchers, displayed an expression of absolute shock. The moment they saw me, the middle-aged woman and the somewhat-younger man hastily took out their guns. I immediately took my straight sword out from its black sheath and cut through their necks.

Their heads fell near the remaining geeky-looking young man. He squeaked in terror, his legs failing him.

He didn't have a weapon, I noticed. I walked up to him, my razor-sharp high-heeled shoes loudly clacking in deliberate steps. I pointed my sword at him and he rapidly shook his head, looking deathly pale.

Oooh, right... I'd heard that this straight sword had once been used by the eastern mafia. It had drunk the blood of around a hundred people by the time I first got it, plus I also fed it a few more victims afterward. It was pretty much a 'demon blade' by now.

Yeah, I was quite sure killing anything with this would send their souls directly to hell... It looked so sinister I wouldn't be surprised if it got an extra effect to terrify people.

...wait a minute.

[—] **[Black-Scabbard Demon Blade] [Kin of Shedy, the Demon]**

□A demon blade that strengthens itself with each life it takes.

[Magic Points: 50/50] [Durability: 1494/1500]

[Total Combat Power: 150]

[Skill: <Fear> <Confusion> <Magic Regeneration>]

The demon blade turned into my kin... So weapons could become one too, I see. Surprising.

Ah, but it also had the same **[Fear]** I got, so I returned it to its sheath, otherwise the conversation would be getting nowhere. The color of the young man's face improved just a little bit.

"Are you people the only one here?"

"Y-y-yes, yes, ah... no, no! M-mister Brian is here too!"

So that *cockroach* really was here.

“Right. What’s he doing here?”

“M-mister Brian is our o-observer... a-and...”

“Mmm, yeah. Where’s he now?”

“H-he’s, he’s been inside the VR capsule since a while ago! Don’t kill me!”

“Right...”

I had a bad feeling about this.

I took enough from the mana storage tank to refill myself. I left the smashing for later, instead heading for the VR room.

I stood in front of the door, and just as I got ready to wrench it open with brute force, it opened by itself once again.

...was all of this Brian inviting me in?

I took out the sword from its black scabbard and carefully entered. There was a row of around ten VR capsules inside the poorly lit room, and only one of them were lit up.

I peered inside. A man resembling Brian was deep in his cold-sleep, his two arms and one of his legs replaced with prosthetics, eerie pitch-black eyes of machinery still wide open.

Was his consciousness in Yggdrasia right now? I wasn’t sure what he was planning to do, but I knew leaving him alive would be dangerous. As I readied my cursed blade, one side of the wall suddenly turned into a screen to display a man with black prosthetic eyes, his surroundings unfamiliar.

“Hey, is my lovely Bunny there? You don’t show up on the screen, but my eyes can see there’s someone there.” He chuckled.

That’s him. That’s Brian’s voice.

The view I could see behind him resembled an old Western European

town hall. There were a few other humans, as well as what looked like a lot of monitor screens showing different sceneries.

“...what are you planning?”

I ceased my manipulation of the cameras and showed myself.

“Ooh, I finally hear you... ooohhh! It’s the Bunny! We finally meet.”

Brian displayed a full-face grin, his motions exaggerated.

“Answer me.”

“Mmm, right, so—”

“My, did the Dark Lady Whitehare really show up where you wanted her? Doesn’t look so special up-close. She really is just a beastman girl, isn’t she?”

Interrupting Brian was a human woman in her mid-twenties barging onto the screen. Beautiful, but it was a flashy kind of beauty.

“...who are you?”

“Whaaat?! You don’t know me?! Are you really the Dark Lady?” The woman on the monitor scoffed in derision. *“Fine then, stupid beast, I’ll tell you. I am one of the current generation of Heroes, Marlene the Sage. Do you understand now, idiot rabbit?”*

“...a Hero?”

Was she the rumored Heroine of Magic, then? I didn’t know how truthful she was, but with how haughty she’d been, calling herself the Sage without a single bit of shame, and surrounding herself with servile good-looking young boys, she was giving off the same vibe as that Perverted Hero.

“...and what do you plan on doing?”

“Why should I be telling you—”

“Aah, that’s my cue to explain!” Brian returned after being pushed outside the screen. *“I’ve prepared the best present for you! Behold!”*

The largest monitor being hung from the ceiling of the hall displayed a world map. It took me a moment to realize it was of Yggdrasia since I'd expected the World Tree to be in the center, but this map had pushed it to the side.

So the center was... the Western Continent... the City of Magic Quarancinq? The moment I recognized the place, a magic circle large enough to cover the whole world appeared on the screen, with Quarancinq as its center.

"That's..."

"Howsat, ever seen a magic circle this size—"

"Heheh, that's my magic circle you're seeing there, little Whitehare! Can you—"

"Indeed! This will allow us to call upon the supreme one, the Fairy King!"

"I might not really believe he exists, but this is still a great step forward in the study of magic!"

I had no idea if they were fighting or getting along. They just kept trying to push each other out of the screen.

"...the Fairy King?"

I think I saw that name in a Temple somewhere, if I remembered correctly.

"Alright, it's showtime!" Brian announced.

All the monitors began to be colored blood-red, and the continent-spanning magic circle being displayed on the enormous monitor started shining faintly.

...no! That's no fairy summoning!

I'd never had an actual look at a magic circle before, but I still knew. I was a demon now. I *knew*. Whatever coming out was *not* going to be a fairy!

"Stop that!"

I couldn't return to Yggdrasia right away from here. **[Causality Alteration]**, then. Brian and Marlene needed to go down *right now*!

I immediately stretched out my hands and crushed their pasts.

“AAAAAAaAArAGGH!!”

But instead of my intended targets, those coughing out blood and collapsing were instead the young boys that had been their shield.

My eyes widened. Marlene smugly cackled.

“Brian sent me records of your fights. You’ve given up one too many secrets, rabbit!”

She was right. My **[Causality Alteration]** prioritized visual information. It had misfired once before at the battle of Xontdix when the guards jumped into my aim.

The bloody light was gaining in strength, and something was trying to take shape.

“Brian’s prepared this trump card just for you, you know? Be grateful.”

“I sure did, little bunny. I sure did.”

“No, you don’t understand! That *thing* should never be summoned!”

The magical light filling the screen subsided, the room plunged into absolute silence.

Marlene looked to the ceiling, seemingly thinking it had failed. Only Brian still showed his demented, *knowing* smile.

“...it’s there.”

The center of the hall was also likely to be the core of the magic circle. There, black light flashed. Slowly, quietly, it revealed itself.

“...what... is that?”

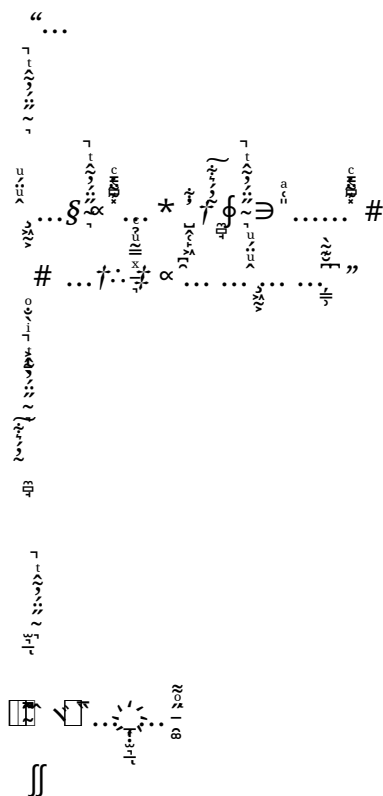
I couldn’t feel any power from that thing. Then where was this shivering coming from...?

Marlene had looked quizzical in the beginning. Soon afterwards, her face grew paler and paler. Had her instincts as a Hero revealed the Truth to her, then?

It was a thing of pure *blackness*. Arms and legs of over two meters, spindly like dried wood. Its torso was just as long, the surface as smooth as a slim length of log. Frayed insectile wings of translucent black grew from its back.

Perhaps its appearance could resemble fairies, if one squinted. But it wasn't. I knew it was no fairy.

It smiled, its mouth looking like nothing more than a fracture on the smooth surface of the pitch-black egg that it had for a head, and it began to speak meaningless *noises*.



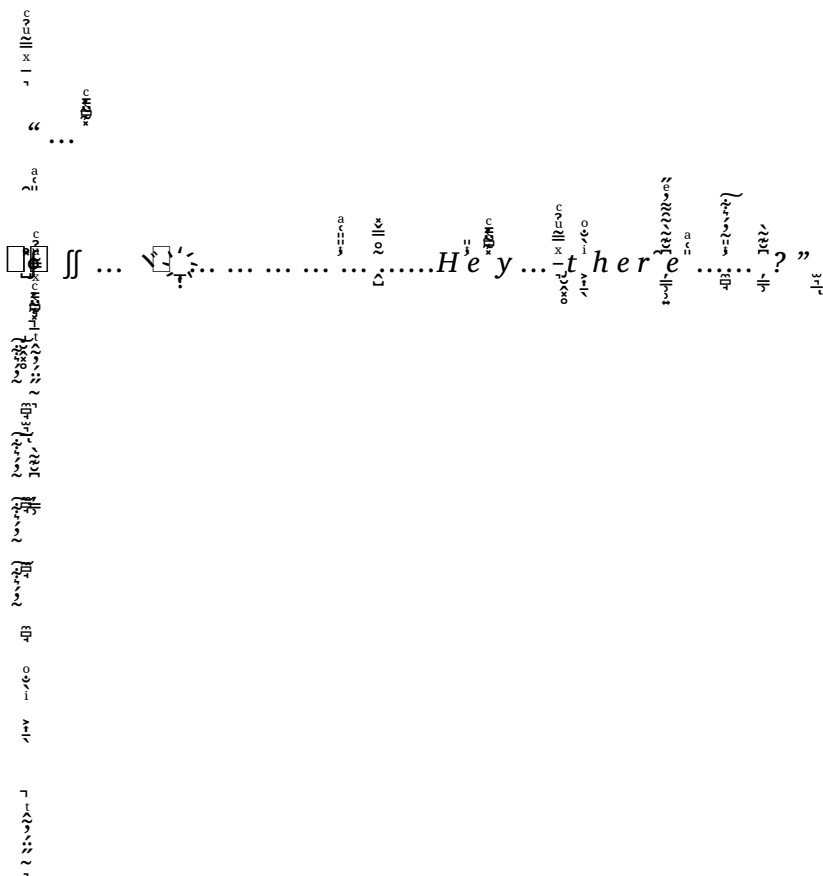
This thing...

[Unseelie Lord□Fiorfata] [Race: Dark Pixie] [Demon Lord]

[Magic Points: 600,000/600,000]

[Total Combat Power: 670,000/670,000]

...is a demon of the Netherworld!



Quarancing, the City of Magic, was a large country located to the western side of Yggdrasia. It was where Marlene the Sage, the Heroine of Magic, was working with Brian, the mastermind behind the dark pixie incident that was turning the world upside down, to complete his plan. His goal was to take vengeance against the Dark Lady, and to do so, he was going to summon the Fairy King.

The Fairy King was a fictional character of nursery tales and children's books. The stories went that bad kids would be taken to the Fairy World, while good kids would receive gifts from fairies. The King was nothing more than a made-up figure to fool children.

Marlene was aware of the existence of another dimension, and yet even she didn't believe the Fairy King truly *lived*.

All the same, she still decided to lend Brian her expertise. For one, she would be paid, and for two, she thought the plan would be an opportunity for the stagnating field of magic to be given a new breath of life. But most importantly, it was the little bit of curiosity within her that had wanted to witness what comes at the end of Brian's insanity.

With the cooperation of Brian's allies — a group consisting of the worst criminals who had escaped from their respective incarceration all over the world — and the magicians of the Tower of Truth, Marlene had created a global-scale magic circle, the very first of its kind. By Marlene's request, mana had been collected from the Saplings of multiple countries to power the circle. Activating the circle had given form to the *thing* in front of her.

“What... is *that*?”

It was a grotesque thing, its black, scraggly torso and limbs resembling nothing so much as a withered tree. Ragged, translucent insectile wings squirmed and twitched, the sight unsettling to all those watching.

At first, Marlene couldn't feel any power coming from it. Its appearance was disturbing, granted, but it was doing nothing beside making a strange noise. For a moment, she thought they'd made a mistake, that they'd summoned an unusual curio, nothing more.

But that wasn't right.

Marlene's instincts of a Hero was telling her that the thing in front of her was *not* what she had thought it to be.

No one else could understand its power. If she hadn't had her experience of fighting a Dark General as a Hero, she wouldn't have realized the dissonance.

When faced with an overly enormous pillar, a normal person would think it to be a wall, a dead end. They'd stop. But Marlene's experience told her it was no wall, that there was more behind the pillar. She knew. She had, *unfortunately*, known.

A crack formed on the blank surface of its oval head. It was *smiling*. As the noise it emitted formed distinct words, Marlene finally understood its true nature.

An Evil God.

The very next moment, she ripped off the necklace on her chest, using her magic to pulverize the special magic stone enclosed in the center, and she shouted at the top of her lungs.

“Extreme threat warning! A Cataclysm-class has been confirmed at Quarancinq! By the authority of a Hero, all countries are requested to enter maximum alertness!”

Saturated with magic power, the special magic stone disintegrated. At the same time, the magic circle sealed inside of it activated to transmit Marlene's words to all the human countries of the world.

Alarms blared throughout the Tower of Truth. Armed with magic assault rifles supplied by Marlene, the magic knights serving as security for the Tower ran to her.

“Lady Marlene! What happened?!”

“What is this monster?!”

“A Cataclysm-class monster...?”

“F-fire at will!!”

The hail of enchanted bullets rained upon the assumed Evil God. It showed not a single reaction.

In addition to the combat power identification, enemies of the human race such as monsters were also classified according to another threat level system. This system also took into consideration special abilities and other factors immeasurable by the Total Combat Power indicator alone.

Disaster-classes were capable of destroying a village or town. The country would deploy soldiers or knights.

Catastrophe-classes were capable of destroying a capital city or a small country. Subjugation of the threat was a matter of national survival.

Calamity-classes were capable of wiping out a continent's population of humans. Defeating the threat required an alliance of multiple countries, with Heroes as the army's center.

Generally, the 'Dark Lord-class' began with the Dark Generals from the lower end to true Dark Lords officially recognized by multiple countries. The former correlated to the Catastrophe-class, while the latter was Calamity-class.

Humans had judged the Dark Lady of the current generation, Whitehare, to be a large threat to humankind due to her actions and ideology, and so had designated her as such. However, her goal was only restricted to 'the destruction of World Saplings', and her personal power was on the lower end when compared to the Dark Lords of ages past. It was why her threat level of Catastrophe-class continued to be unchanged.

Cataclysm-classes, however, were exponentially more dangerous than the Calamity-classes of Dark Lords below it.

Those included in this class were Gods. They were far beyond anything humans could throw at them. The very survival of the world was at risk the moment they became an enemy.

They were to Dark Lords as adults were to babies. What Brian had

done in an attempt to defeat Whitehare was practically equivalent to burning down the forest to kill a pest.

Marlene could not even begin to fathom what he had been thinking. She spared a glance to the man while keeping her attention on the Evil God. Brian began to speak to Whitehare on the screen, his expression enraptured.

“Finally, my wish shall be granted... or should I say *your* wish, little bunny? I had hated you so, so much, ever since you gave me this body. I could think of nothing else but you... but one day, I just... realized something, you know? I realized I *wanted to break this world*. The moment I did, I finally understood you. Hahah...maybe I’ve fallen in love with you. So I’ll break this world, I’ll break you, and I will *break...* for you...”

The madman desired the end of the world, and even of himself. Cold dread ran down Marlene’s spine as she listened to his insanity. She immediately chanted the most powerful spell she could use.

“**[Freeze]** !!”

The sixth-rank spell would completely transform a single target into ice and shatter them, ignoring any remaining health.

If the target could be affected by the spell, then death was guaranteed.

She had wanted to listen to her fury and kill Brian, at first, but the man didn’t pose a threat with his combat power.

Instead, the pride and self-respect Marlene had as a Hero guided her spell toward the Evil God.

“...wha?!”

The spell of **[Freeze]** she’d casted with all her power shattered into nothing more than icy dust as it touched the skin of the Evil God.

Marlene had cut no corners with her spell, even when she had cast it in her rage. She had had a hand in summoning it to this world in the first place. If she didn’t take the lead in dealing with the threat, she

And yet it wasn't even an attack. It was nothing more than a Blessing that the Evil God, the demon, had granted to herald the beginning.

“Grk-”

One of the grey-tainted knights abruptly croaked. He collapsed, his expression ecstatic, his body fully subsumed by the color. The corpse slowly melted, leaving behind a patch of ash-colored flower buds all blooming in concert.

The sweet aroma of the grey flowers suffused the air. Those who smelled it soon found themselves suffering the same fate as the knights, to be nothing more than euphoric seedbeds for the plants. The blooming flowers released tiny dark pixies

— winged, wicked fairies, as emaciated as mummies — and the creatures quickly overflowed.

Under the blissful control of the fragrance, the knights reached out to the dark pixies. The small creatures smirked, flying to the knights to rip out their throats with fangs and teeth.

One after another, the knights lacking magic power became nothing more than nutrients to feed the grey growth, giving birth to dark pixies, and dying to them.

Only Brian was untouched by the grey. His demented smile turned into mad laughter.

“Come on, Unseelie Lord, god of the Netherworld! Consume this world! Devour Earth! Purge *all* of existence!”

Looked like the flowers get those with lower magic power first, Marlene thought. She grunted in effort, using her own magic to hold at bay the grey corruption that was gradually claiming her left arm. As despair filled the hall, she activated the final disposable magitool she had to teleport away, escaping Quarancinq.

Surrounded by the knights who had all succumbed to the growth and the demonic Unseelie Lord itself, only Brian was still laughing in his madness.

Brian was safe only because he was in Yggdrasia as an Avatar, while

his real body was on Earth. But the very fact that he was using an Avatar was hinting the presence of Earth to the Unseelie Lord, the planet attracting the demon's interest with its generous population of corrupted souls.

The world of Yggdrasia, and the world of Earth. It had been by corruption that the Unseelie Lord heeded the call of the humans' summoning and manifested itself. Joy filled it, as it discovered something *special* enough to catch its interest. It stretched out its arm, the black, withered stick of a limb heading for Brian, for the bridge between two worlds.

“Agkh!”

And at that exact moment, a straight sword appeared to pierce through Brian's heart from the *inside out*.

He looked down on the blade and laughed, his euphoria undiminished. The blade slashed upward to cut through his head, and his body vanished in a shower of light particles.

The monitor screens shut themselves off one after another. On the last screen to shut down, the Unseelie Lord saw the sight of a white rabbit girl glaring at it with crimson eyes, her hands still holding onto the sword that was stuck inside the man sleeping in his capsule. Its faceless head cracked open into a grin.

Chapter 81 RETURN TO YGGDRASIA

Crap, he noticed me!

That thing summoned from the enormous magic circle saw *me* through one of the monitors. Apparently it even realized the existence of Earth in that instant. It greeted me *in English*.

That sort of horror could not be allowed to reach Earth right now.

Physical weapons such as metallic bullets and gunpowder explosions barely affected spiritual lifeforms. Submerging it in a large amount of flame would work, but to burn down something so powerful would require the direct heat of over a dozen volcano eruptions.

How could the humans of Earth even hit something that could move as fast as a missile while still not showing up on radar?

A Demon Lord. A demon of the highest rank, surpassing Archdemons. A god of the demons.

Fiorfata, the Unseelie Lord.

I hadn't known this before. It had been my soul, a soul now demonic, that had told me the thing's identity.

Had the summoners meant to call it up from the very beginning? Or had it been a mistake? Though judging from how overjoyed Brian had looked in his nasty monologue, it was far more likely that it had been intentional, that he'd worked with the criminal magicians of Yggdrasia for exactly this purpose.

At any rate, I couldn't fight it here. Earth didn't allow me to recover my mana, and it had six times my magic. I'd just get ground to dust.

On the other side of the screen, Fiorfata reached its hand out to Brian's avatar, the 'bridge' that was connecting Earth to Yggdrasia.

The moment I realized what it was trying to do, I took out my demon blade from its black sheath and stabbed into the heart of Brian, still sleeping in his VR capsule, while using **[Dimensional Manipulation]**

and **[Causality Alteration]** at the same time.

His bodies, both the one here and the one on the other side, jerked at the same time. The screen showed the blade coming out of Brian's avatar from the inside.

I flicked the blade upward, slashing through his head to finish him off. Brian's life, as well as the connection from here to Yggdrasia, abruptly vanished. Right before the screen cut off, Fiorfata looked at me and grinned.

...no chance of not being its enemy now, huh?

But wait, something was strange. Brian should be dead, yet I didn't see his soul anywhere.

Just as the connection cut off and I was taking a breather, Brian's corpse began to turn *grey*, bubbling and bursting into sludge.

I flinched. The sludge overflowed so quickly the capsule was nearly at its breaking point, grey flowers rapidly growing on the liquid. They bloomed in concert, and an eldritch voice came from the blossoms.

“.. *.litt. .le. . .bū n...ny . . .* ”

The moment I recognized it was Brian's voice, I instantly concluded that it would be far too dangerous to touch the grey sludge. I used **[Dimensional Manipulation]** to force a teleportation to outside the military compound.

So Brian had already fallen to Fiorfata's Blessing, I see.

When I arrived outside the compound, the blizzard I left behind was still going on. Apparently the soldiers had already retreated. There was no sudden gunfire.

I stayed in mid-air and looked at the compound. The grey sludge erupted, bursting out of the roof.

“*L i t " ℓ l e ḡ ' ḡ n n̄y ṽ ! !* ”

Brian's soul was transforming into a demon's...no, that wasn't quite

right. More like it was being turned into breeding ground to give birth to more demons. Grey flowers continued to bloom on top of the overflowing grey mud, and they were spawning innumerable wicked-looking tiny fairies.

Dark pixies. So that's what the low-demon subspecies of gremlins looked like. No matter how weak they were, the humans of Earth couldn't possibly handle an infinite amount of them.

“**[Absorption]** , **[Causality Alteration]** , parallel activation!”

I cranked **[Absorption]** to full blast and absorbed all the heat, the light, and the mana from the surrounding, then I used **[Causality Alteration]** on the space of nothingness and rewrote every single thing that had ever happened inside it.

I took only the altered history inside me, mixing it with my internal mana, then pushed it back outward and focused it, creating a white ball of magic power inside my mouth.

I spoke **words of power**, at the same time expelling the ball toward the compound.

“—**[Nadir]** —”

In a blink of an eye, the compound, as well as what remained of Brian, were covered in a white space one kilometer across. A sharp *clang* of a tuning fork rang out, and in the very next moment, *everything* inside the white space dissolved into white icy dust.

I breathed heavily, despite my lack of need for respiration. The attack had been much too mentally demanding.

What used to be the compound was now nothing more than a perfect hemisphere in the ground with a diameter of one kilometer.

I'd just refilled from a mana storage tank, and now my magic was already down to half. Thankfully, the white space had succeeded in wiping out Fiorfata's interference together with Brian's soul.

...Demon Lords were crazy. I really, *really* couldn't afford to leave it

alone.

Excluding master-servant relationships, normal demons generally feared those of a higher rank. For better or for worse, however, I wasn't a normal, natural demon, and so I could face it without fear ruling me.

I needed to get back to Yggdrasia right away.

If I could drag out the engagement and fight while destroying Saplings for more power, then I should be able to survive Fiorfata, if only barely. It was going to be a very tight balancing act.

But I couldn't return from here. I'd already torn the facilities of this compound to pieces with my **[Dimensional Manipulation]**. Now, the only remaining decent connection to Yggdrasia was at the 12th research center that held the game department. The dimensional distortions themselves still remained in several locations, but crossing dimensions alone by my own power was still far too dangerous.

And even if I wanted to return to the 12th, I would need to travel a distance that was practically continent-spanning. I was quite sure I could do it in a day as I was at the moment, but I wouldn't know what was happening in Yggdrasia in the meantime. Besides, it'd be dangerous to allow that Demon Lord to find out how I came here.

What should I do, then?

“[Dimensional Manipulation]”

I used the skill to search for cyber activity in the local area.

There had to be something here. There were more than three millions of them throughout the whole world, after all.

“...there you are.”

I teleported directly there, even if it was a bit of a waste of mana. The outside scenery abruptly changed into a cramped room. I appeared right when the young man inside, probably of Hispanic descent from his appearance, was about to put the VR device on his head. He gaped at me.

“T-the Dark Bunny Lady?!”

“...sorry, let me borrow that for a bit.”

That title again? I really have to wonder what sort of impression these people had of me.

He was a player of the MMORPG *World of Yggdrasia*. The VR device he possessed was granted access rights to the 12th research center through the game program.

I pushed him to the side and touched the device, using my Dimensional Manipulation skill. Yeah, this would work. I could get to Yggdrasia from here.

Just as I was about to leave, however, the dumbfounded young man returned to his senses and called at me in a panic.

“W-wait! Please give me an autograph!!!”

What.

I dove into the digital world after signing on his shirt. I arrived at the login screen for *World of Yggdrasia*, a place I'd been to only once before.

“My, my, miss No. 13, right? Well then, please show me your login ID and-argh!”

“Out of my way.”

The guide for the game, the tuxedo-wearing stuffed toy in the shape of a dog, was blocking my path, so I tore it apart with my claws and continued to the door deeper in.

I used Dimensional Manipulation to force the closed door open and jumped into the light inside. I arrived at the World Tree, where I'd set my home to be.

The moment I returned, the ball of slime and the little monkey that were my two kins scrambled to be the first to dive into my chest.

boing!

“Ook!”

“Hey, Blobsy, Panda. Sorry to have made you worry...”

**boing-oing!*”

“Oookkk...”

They nuzzled against me as I petted them... they were shivering a little? Oh, they were scared. Being kins to the demon that was me, they’d also realized that the Demon Lord Fiorfata had appeared in this world.

“Listen up, okay? I have to go fight it. So you two should stay here.”

boing!!!

“OOK!!!”

Both of them clung to me, seemingly wanting to follow along.

“Come on, listen. You two would evaporate from just the shockwaves alone. Just stay here, protect our home so that I can fight without worry... please.” I said, fixing eye contact with them.

...boing.

“Oook...”

They reluctantly relented and moved off of me.

It was better this way. I wanted them to survive even if the worst happened.

“World Tree! Where is Fiorfata?!” I asked, looking up at the enormous trunk. With a shake of its leaves, it told me as much as it knew about the current situation of Yggdrasia.

“Eh?”

And two white magic stones, the same stone I received whenever a Saplings was reborn, fell from the World Tree into my hand.

Had the demihuman resistance done it again? Or had the country that had summoned Fiorfata fallen? Apparently even in this chaos, the World Tree was still searching for safe locations to revive Saplings in.

But once Fiorfata started being active, there was no guarantee those

newly reborn Saplings would remain safe. I needed to attract the Demon Lord's attention away from the new Saplings.

“World Tree! Strengthen the barrier around you as much as you can, and make sure *nothing* gets in here. If you die, this world dies with you, so stay safe. I'll be going.”

Just as I activated the Sapling network to teleport to where Fiorfata was and the scenery was beginning to change, I saw Blobsy and Panda mysteriously looking and nodding at each other.

I noticed something wrong in the air the very moment I arrived.

From the new Sapling inside a valley, I flew into the sky. Several hundred kilometers away, grey miasma was rising up from somewhere inside the capital City of Magic Quarancingq.

I'd guessed correctly, it seemed. Quarancingq's Sapling had been destroyed.

I cut through the air, heading toward the capital city. There, inside the collapsing spire, I saw the Demon Lord Fiorfata spreading its grey sludge.

The surviving humans were fighting back with magical artillery, but even if the weapons could shoot down a flying dragon, they still weren't enough to do anything to the Demon Lord.

Fiorfata only smiled at the meaningless resistance, a crack running through its featureless head. Just as it was about to fire off another Blessing Light to give birth to more monsters...

“— [Gospel] —!”

The Demon Lord's head was barely pushed backward by my attack, and the shockwave cleared away the surrounding sludge. Fiorfata was still, its posture fixed in place. Only its head turned to look at the one who had attacked it, and it smiled.

“Fiorfata! Your opponent is me!”

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Archdemon Lv. 25]

☐The rabbit demon of Laplace. Trickster and guide of man's fate.

[Magic Points: 84,000/97,000] 6,000↑

[Total Combat Power: 100,100/106,700] 6,600↑

[Unique Skill: <Causality Alteration> <Dimensional Manipulation> <Absorption> <Materialization>]

[Racial Skill: <Fear> <Mist Form>]

[Simple Identification] [Human Form (Wonderful)] [Subspace Inventory]

[Dark Lady]

[Unseelie Lord☐Fiorfata] [Race: Dark Pixie] [Demon Lord]

☐One of the seven Demon Lords ruling Netherworld. A god of the Netherworld.

[Magic Points: 598,400/600,000]

[Total Combat Power: 668,400/670,000]

Chapter 82 HEROES OF THE WORLD

A large-scale mana quake originating from the central region of the Western Continent had been observed.

In the same moment, the Sage Heroine of Magic had also issued an ‘extreme threat warning’, announcing the appearance of a threat to the entire world: a Cataclysm-class monster.

As the monster began to act, around the world, all those above a certain level of power unconsciously sensed its presence.

They trembled before what was thought to be an Evil God.

But the danger wasn’t limited to the Evil God alone.

Not only was the Evil God summoning an endless amount of low demons called ‘dark pixies’ around itself, the same dark pixies were also being spawned without limits from the Origin points that made up the worldwide magic circle. While protecting their citizens, the countries in the region were also dispatching their armies to clear out these Origins.

An international summit had been held through the use of the ‘clairvoyant mirrors’. Of those countries not directly handling the crisis, the small countries would give as much military support as they could, while the large countries would deploy their trump cards, sending squadrons of flying battleships — airships equipped with magical artillery — to defeat the Evil God.

It had been some ten-odd years since the technological uplift granted by an oracle of the Temples, and the subsequent beginning of the magical weapon project. Tactics against worldwide threats that made use of the Heroes as the centerpieces were now considered a thing of the past.

Nowadays, Heroes were only deployed in scenarios where magical artillery wasn’t available, such as in limited warfare.

The enemy this time was designated Cataclysm-class, and so the humans believed that destruction of whole cities would be inevitable.

But mankind had forgotten. They had forgotten why Heroes were held in such high regard, why they were far more valued than an army of millions.

It wasn't about their personal combat power alone.

In a world of peace, the human race had forgotten that Heroes were the *hope* of the people.

“Not like this...”

Marlene the Sage was at her secret hideout in the Academy City of Cinqres in the Central Continent. She was wrapping talismans imbued with holy water around her left arm, sealing the curse of the Unseelie Lord that had turned the limb grey.

There was no one else here. The majority of her subordinates had been buried in the collapse of the Tower of Truth.

She still had collaborators around the world, albeit not many of them. But she was faced with a far more fundamental problem: she could no longer show herself in public.

At the moment, Marlene was the criminal that had summoned the Evil God to this world.

She still had her reputation as a Heroine. Or from another point of view, it meant that without her reputation, she would be immediately thrown into jail the moment somebody found her. As it was, she could see what would happen if she showed her face: the Heroine would be forced to stand in the front line against the Evil God, to be used and thrown away.

Marlene's pride could not allow it to happen.

The only way she could regain her honor now was to somehow deal with the Evil God herself. But she absolutely could not allow herself to be forced to fight until her death, to not be allowed even thoughts of retreat. She would not be *enslaved*.

Marlene caressed the enormous magic stone in the middle of the

room.

It was the magic stone taken from the corpse of a Dark General-class monster defeated a decade ago, the Dragon Zombie.

Marlene had recovered it in absolute secrecy. To make it into her trump card, she had been secretly stealing the mana of Cinqres over a duration of ten years, turning the stone into an explosive. It was the Yggdrasia equivalent of a nuclear weapon.

She could turn a capital city into ashes in a single attack with this. With the enormous amount of mana it consumed and its destructive power, even the Tower of Truth would have put it into the list of forbidden artifacts, never to be created or used, if they were aware of it.

Marlene reverently picked it up. On her expression was a hint of madness, the same madness of Brian and his cooperators.

“A Cataclysm-class monster...”

Gold the Warrior was infiltrating the small country of Oisadra, located in the southern region of the Eastern Continent.

He, too, had noticed the manifestation of the Unseelie Lord. Through the demihumans’ information network, he had found out that it was a Cataclysm-class threat.

Gold had been cooperating with the demihuman resistance. He was no longer a Hero of humanity, instead deciding to fight as a true Hero, a savior of the world.

At first, he had thought he should inform everyone that the main cause lay in the deeds of humans, but he realized that in all likelihood, the nobility would never agree to it.

If he tried to leverage his Heroic reputation, he would also be bound by that very same reputation. More likely than not, he’d just be wasting his time.

Gold was aware of the Dark Lady Whitehare’s plans now. He couldn’t

allow himself to waste time and worry about it when she was still continuing her lonely battle.

“What will you do, sir Hero?”

The young elven princess was with him on his current mission. She stared at him, her gaze cool.

He might have been cooperating, but until now, the Heroes had never shown any initiative in protecting demihumans. She must not yet trust him fully.

Should he fight the Evil God as a Hero of the world? Or should he save Yggdrasia by continuing as he had been, liberating Saplings from the humans’ hands?

“...I’ll continue to destroy the Saplings.”

Gold made his conclusion.

He still believed he should challenge the Evil God for the sake of Yggdrasia, even if he knew he’d lose. But he also knew that *committing suicide* wouldn’t save the world.

And this was a Cataclysm-class monster. A threat far surpassing the Dark General that Gold had lost to, as well as the Dark Lady Whitehare herself. He had enough presence of mind to understand that at the moment, he had absolutely no chance of winning.

Even if he succeeded in destroying the Saplings, everything would go down the drain if the world ended.

But according to a source of information in Touze Empire, the Dark Lady Whitehare had gained quite a bit of power after destroying the Sapling at Xontdix.

If that was true, then perhaps Gold and his allies could be of help to the Dark Lady simply by continuing to destroy Saplings.

Gold hadn’t been able to become the True Savior... but perhaps the Dark Lady could. Perhaps that girl of white would save the world.

“I’ll aid the Dark Lady. I believe it’s the path to saving this world.”
Gold replied.

“I see. Then I shall also offer my cooperation, sir Hero.”

The elven princess looked into Gold’s eyes and nodded deeply. She showed a hint of a smile, and for the first time, it was for him.

One of the Heroes had reached for forbidden magic in order to preserve her pride.

One of the Heroes had thrown away his pride to protect the world, devoting himself to his duty.

And the final Hero...

“Hahahah! I, Calimero, shall surely vanquish the Evil God for the sake of my 12751 lovers all over the world!”

...the Blademaster. He had claimed the treasured holy sword of the Holy City of Ayune in order to complete his mission as a true Hero. Pure instincts was guiding him toward the Unseelie Lord Fiorfata, and he set out alone in boisterous laughter.

Even after spending ten thousand mana for my **[Gospel]**, Fiorfata’s own magic only went down a thousand.

If I had to compare this whole situation to the video games I’d only ever read about, then I was pretty much trying to kill the last boss right after coming out from the tutorial here.

At least I got Fiorfata to focus on me. If I let it run amok, this whole region would be extinct of all life.

“—’—∞. ≠/]]”† ‡α ϕ —→’α
—†

The moment I heard the nò ~~ise~~ it made, I immediately teleported

hundreds of meters away. I didn't even dare to stay and watch what it was about to do.

Upon my arrival, I saw a small ball of light falling on where I used to be, violently exploding and scouring the buildings there into dust.

“Oof!”

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Archdemon Lv. 25]

[Magic Points: 78,400/97,000]

[Total Combat Power: 88,100/106,700]

Just the shockwave alone already took off nearly five thousand, even through my hasty guard. This really wasn't an opponent I could fight head-on. Out of all the battles I'd been in, this was the most hopeless.

But I still had a plan!

“**[Dimensional Manipulation] !**”

I teleported a magical blast right to Fiorfata's head. It simply bounced off with a *clang*.

An attack worth five hundred magic was less effective than a scratch to a Demon Lord. But I needed it to see me as an *enemy*, else my whole plan would collapse.

“Come on, get me, Fiorfata!”

I shouted and whisked through the sky. I could see the Demon Lord behind me and chasing me, the fissure of a smile once more showing on its face.

I was about fifteen meters off the ground, flying fast. Fiorfata flew at the same speed, once in a while throwing at me the same explosions it did before.

I dodged, weaving left and right, sometimes even teleporting. Forests and hills turned into craters behind us.

But that was fine. Fiorfata knew I was a Demon, so it didn't use the light that spawned dark pixies. It was only using simple magical

attacks. Honestly, if it had used curses, the lingering damage to the environment would be so much worse later on.

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Archdemon Lv. 25]

[Magic Points: 73,500/97,000]

[Total Combat Power: 83,200/106,700]

I was getting ground down, slowly but surely.

Fiorfata hadn't even seen me as a real opponent yet. The Demon Lord was still just a hunter leisurely chasing around a rabbit to pass the time during a walk in the forest.

Right now, its frivolity was the only reason why I hadn't suffered any fatal wounds yet.

But I wouldn't even last for a few hours like this. I pushed down my growing restlessness and focused on dodging.

Finally, I arrived at my destination.

"There's Quathuit!"

Quathuit, a small country to the southeast of the City of Magic Quarancinq. It served as the middleman for trade between Quarancinq and the City of Gambling Sautonnn further south. On this small continent, it was the country with the most merchants.

From afar, I could already see the streets of Quathuit being assaulted by so much dark pixies it looked like a thick cloud of locusts.

"**[Causality Alteration]** , **[Dimensional Manipulation]** , parallel activation!"

I slapped my hands together. The thousands of dark pixies I could see vanished in an instant.

The knights fighting them were dumbfounded. Then they saw me flying, and they shouted.

"T-the Dark Lady?!"

“Evacuate, NOW!” I yelled, spreading my voice as far away as possible, and I passed them by. A moment later, explosions ripped apart the area, soldiers and all.

“Get to the forests!”

That was the most warning they’d get. I didn’t exactly care if humans lived or died, but that didn’t mean I wanted them to go extinct.

As Quathuit’s castle came into my view, the magic artillery set up on top of the castle walls all fired at me.

I squeezed my hand. The projectiles avoided me to instead rain down on the direction of the Demon Lord hot on my tail.

Fiorfata responded with its own explosions an instant later, bombarding the castle. Quathuit’s barrier disappeared, and the World Tree sent me a white magic stone.

One down. To the next.

Chapter 83 BATTLES OF THE MAGIC CIRCLE

When the dangerous criminals throughout the whole world escaped from their prisons, it had been the beginning. The dark pixie incident had come soon afterward, and these criminals had been suspected to be the culprits.

Their true goal had been to summon the Evil God that they called the Fairy King. As the human race realized that a Cataclysm-class threat, an existence even more powerful than the Dark Lady, had been summoned, they soon found themselves in a battle for their very own continued survival.

With confiscated evidence and the testimonies of a group of prisoners that had been successfully prevented from killing themselves, the true identity of this Evil God had been partially revealed.

According to the old literature that had been left behind by the ancient elves thousands of years ago, this Evil God was no denizen of the Fairy World, despite its similar appearance. It was one of the Gods of the Netherworld.

It was the Unseelie Lord, the ruler of dark pixies. A true Evil God by

all accounts.

Apparently, among the wanted criminal escapist, there had been a magician of Quarancinq who used to pursue dangerous, experimental summonings, and they had planned on calling up the Unseelie Lord.

With this newfound knowledge, the different names the countries of the world had given to the Evil God were now consolidated into a single title. The coalition of large countries that had been outside of the large-scale magic circle were now deploying flying battleships to subjugate the Unseelie Lord.

By all rights, the Heroes should have been taking command of the alliance army to unify the countries worldwide. But the most suitable Hero, the Warrior, were currently missing. Unconfirmed information had it that he had been seen to be working with the Dark Lady's faction, betraying mankind.

The Heroine who had warned the whole world of the appearance of the Evil God, the Sage, had been reported to be the principal culprit behind the summoning of the Unseelie Lord, and was currently on the run. But similarly to the Warrior, a public investigation of the Sage at the moment would be very likely to provoke unrest among the populace. The search remained stalled.

The only Hero remaining was the Blademaster, but not many could catch up to what the eccentric genius was thinking.

Before anyone could realize, the Blademaster had already departed on his own to defeat the Unseelie Lord.

The countries inside of the large-scale summoning circle that had called up the Unseelie Lord were currently suffering attacks from thousands of dark pixies.

Even when the whole world had united to fight back against the Unseelie Lord, these countries were still tied down by the dark pixies. They needed to deal with the magic circle that was spawning the creatures itself.

The Origin points of the magic circle were, by the Sage's request, placed in sites with a mana supply line, so the locations themselves were known. The countries near the Origins were deploying knights and adventurers to raid the sites.

Among the Origins, the six points arranged in a hexagram on the outer circumference of the magic circles were the most important. They were also where the criminals' resistance was the fiercest. One of the hexagramal Origin points had been located in an old dwarven ruins in Touze Empire. The knights were attacking the place, but there were those among the enemies' number who had once been involved in the development of deadly magical weapons. The attackers were taking heavy casualties.

As a result, Touze Empire had deployed a task force of around thirty members, all of them either powerful knights, magicians, or trusted adventurers. Their plan was to invade the ruins through a secret pathway.

"Come on, geezer, think of your age. Why'd you have to come along?" said the emperor of Touze, Tischlar — or Tiz, as those close to him called him.

"Surely you jest, boy. I should think the Emperor himself going to the front line would be far more egregious." The old butler blandly replied, his hands busy with his own preparations.

"...I told you, stop it with the 'boy' already," Tiz said, sighing quietly with a wry smile.

Tiz and his old butler had decided to join the task force.

The emperor had nearly a thousand combat power himself, while the old butler had once been the leader of an intelligence organization. Despite his age, he was still more powerful than Tiz.

But this task force was embarking on what was almost, in a sense, a *suicide mission*. Even when the world was facing the risk of destruction, some might still accuse the Emperor of neglecting his responsibility by joining the mission.

But he had a reason for his decision.

While the country had been peaceful and the family hadn't had a chance to experience the battlefield for several generations, at their roots, the Touze royal family was still a house of warriors. The emperor visiting the front line was practically a family custom.

Furthermore, Tiz was still young. The noble loyalists of the previous

emperor was still opposing him even now. Tiz needed to show his citizens that he was taking an active role.

And finally: Salia, his former bodyguard knight, was directly involved in the current mission.

Salia was daughter to the knight squadron leader that was one of Tiz's supporters. She couldn't be allowed to fall into the hands of the loyalist nobles. It was why Tiz needed to keep the task force limited to just himself, the knights and adventurers he trusted, and Salia's father and his aides. The matter had to be dealt with as quietly as possible.

The knights were distracting the enemies outside while Tiz's task force infiltrated the dwarven ruins through the secret tunnel. They headed toward the Origin point that was still active to maintain the magic circle.

After several casualties, they reached the innermost chamber. Salia was waiting for them together with several of the most heinous of criminals being wanted worldwide.

"Your Majesty! You've come to see me!" Salia said, a crazed smile showing on a face half-paralyzed.

"Salia... I'm stopping you. Come on, geezer, knight leader."

"Yes, sir."

The old butler responded dispassionately. The knight squadron leader nodded, his resolve hardened, though his lips still quivered upon being forced to kill his own daughter due to his position.

The escapists had only been incarcerated for their dangerous ideology. They weren't necessarily personally powerful.

There were no deadly traps or magic weapons in the criminals' hands, and the knights with nearly a thousand combat power and unbending determination soon proved too much for them. The task force tore through the criminals one after another, even as they took casualties of their own.

Soon enough, only Salia was left. She screeched, charging forward

with the strength of an ex-royal bodyguard.

“Your Majesty! Your Majesty! Sir TISCHLAAARR!!!”

In response, Tiz unsheathed the magic sword he’d acquired on his own when he was young. A single thrust pierced through Salia’s heart.

She reached out her bloody hands even as her heart was run through, giving him her final smile.

“...Ti...z...”

Then she overloaded the fire magic stone that Brian had given her, releasing an inferno to cover the two whole.

“Boy!”

The old butler let loose a shout that was almost a scream. Tiz appeared from within the blaze unharmed, flicking his cloak as if to blow away the flames.

“So you’re unhurt, boy...”

“...I should be, with just that much fire.”

Tiz was a Child of God, one who possessed a special ability. His was the Blessing of Fire.

Salia had been his bodyguard once. She was, of course, aware about his ability. She desired him, but she had no intention of killing him. She just wanted him to remember her death.

Tiz stayed silent, heavy thoughts apparent on his expression. He swung his enchanted sword without a word and shattered the magitool that was the Origin of the magic circle.

The mission was a success, despite vast casualties. The survivors cheered in triumph.

But this was not yet the end. The Evil God, the Unseelie Lord, was still there. The battle for the whole world was only just beginning.

“...Shedy,” he muttered. Thoughts of the Dark Lady Whitehare, the girl of white, and her lonely battle passed through his mind.

Tiz had heard that Shedy was destroying Saplings to prevent the collapse of the world from some of the captured demihuman resistance soldiers in his custody.

His fellow humans had all waved it off as simple nonsense, but Tiz had known Shedy. He didn't think it was just meaningless destruction. As Tiz the individual instead of Tischlar the emperor, he had leaked the information that Shedy had gotten stronger after tearing down Xontdix's Sapling to the resistance.

She was gaining power with each Sapling destroyed. And in the end, the world of humans would collapse, and the collapse of the world would be prevented.

What he did was treason, pure and simple. A betrayal to the human race and to the citizens of his empire. But a thought had taken root in a corner of Tiz's mind.

In the end, is she not the only hope we have of defeating the Unseelie Lord?

[Shedy] **[Race:** Bunny Girl] **[Archdemon** Lv. 26]

☐The rabbit demon of Laplace. Trickster and guide of man's fate.

[Magic Points: 83,400/100,000] 3,000↑

[Total Combat Power: 93,400/110,000] 3,300↑

[Unique Skill: <Causality Alteration> <Dimensional Manipulation> <Absorption> <Materialization>]

[Racial Skill: <Fear> <Mist Form>]

[Simple Identification] **[Human Form** (Wonderful)] **[Subspace Inventory]**

[Dark Lady]

Quathuit's Sapling got dragged into my fight with Fiorfata, and I got a little bit stronger again.

The white magic stone and the elapsed time had filled up my magic a

bit, but the shockwaves from the Demon Lord's attacks and my short-range dodging teleportations were preventing my reserve from being full.

“— [Gospel] —!”

My ranged attack wiped out the dark pixies that were naturally spawning around Fiorfata. Doing this was really rough on my mana reserve, but I had to keep attacking. The Demon Lord needed to be focusing on me-

“Whoa!”

Too close! I instantly teleported to dodge the blast it sent at me.

[Unseelie Lord □ Fiorfata] [Race: Dark Pixie] [Demon Lord]

□ One of the seven Demon Lords ruling Netherworld. A god of the Netherworld.

[Magic Points: 584,500/600,000]

[Total Combat Power: 654,500/670,000]

Fiorfata's own mana store was somewhat decreasing from being hit by my attacks and from shooting its own magical blasts a few times, but not that much. As I expected, the Demon Lord was also regenerating its magic with time.

But it was still, thankfully, wasting magical attacks on me in response to my provocations. Was it *playing*?

Quathuit's capital was pretty much just ruins now. Fiorfata laughed, its body shaking, its withered arms and insectile wings spreading widely.

Though people in nearby towns might have had better luck, not many in the capital had managed to escape.

I wouldn't justify myself, saying that their deaths were necessary to save the world. If they had to blame someone, they should blame me.

They would survive if only they just moved away from the Saplings,

but right now, I had no way to tell them that. And even if I could, the human race had been dependent on the Saplings for far too long. They wouldn't leave.

I had to continue fighting. I had to, in order to allow as many lives of this world to survive as possible.

Once more, I spent my hard-earned magic to attack the Demon Lord. I immediately headed toward the next country with a Sapling.

Fiorfata still followed.

Next up was the small country of Katrinne to the east. And after that, some distance away from Katrinne, would be the island country Roxante.

At my current speed, it wouldn't take more than a few hours, but I had to do it all while dodging Fiorfata's attacks and continuing my provocations. A game of chase where the slightest mistake would instantly kill me.

"There it is!"

Katrinne was coming into my view. This small continent had been close to the center of the magic circle, and damage from dark pixies had been particularly severe.

I didn't have the leeway to help out the humans this time around, plus they were also aiming at me with magic artillery anyway. I kicked the shooters from the castle walls, turning the cannon that was moments away from firing toward Fiorfata's direction.

It missed, obviously, but that was enough to get the Demon Lord's attention. I guided its attacks, using myself as bait. The stronghold that Katrinne had as its castle fell, the magical barrier covering the city vanished, and the World Tree sent a white magic stone into my hand.

I threw the stone into my mouth and headed to my next destination, Roxante.

The country was relatively close, but I still had to cross nearly a hundred kilometers of ocean. There would be nothing I could use on the sea as shelter. Dodging Fiorfata was about to get a lot more

difficult.

As I began to get impatient, seeing my magic reserve slowly diminishing, the ocean in front of me suddenly roiled and bubbled. Dozens of sea dragons appeared from the water.

Not now!

But just as I got ready for battle, the sea dragons ignored me, instead attacking Fiorfata chasing behind.

“...are you helping me?”

Chapter 84 MONSTER REINFORCEMENT

Just as I was crossing the sea, a school of sea dragons suddenly appeared. They passed me by, instead attacking Fiorfata behind me.

Were they helping me...?

The sight rooted me to the spot for a moment. The last sea dragon to appear, also the largest of them by quite a bit, gave a glance backward. Its enormous tail flicked water at me.

The flying droplets hit my cheek, jolting me out of my surprise.

“...got it.”

I gave a small nod to it. I turned around, continuing on my way to the island country.

The sea dragons must have realized that Fiorfata was an enemy of this world. Perhaps they had heard the World Tree’s will, and just as they had been attacking human countries to liberate the Saplings, so too were they now understanding what I was trying to do.

I had looked into the eyes of that final sea dragon. *Leave this to us, and we’ll leave the rest to you.*

And so I had replied with a nod. *I will, and I won’t disappoint you.*

Pillars of water rose behind me with each of Fiorfata’s magical explosions, scattering sea dragon corpses through the sky.

The sea dragons were about four to five thousand combat power. Their opponent was more than a hundred times more powerful than them. But still they fearlessly challenged the Demon Lord, sacrificing themselves for the sake of Ygdrasia.

“I swear I won’t waste this time you’ve bought me!”

I stopped dodging, now focusing on pure speed. I used everything I had, turning even the lift created from flying close to the water

surface to my purpose. The island of Roxante appeared in my view faster than I expected.

Roxante was a port town. There weren't many people living there, only a few tens of thousands at most.

As the harbor came into view, thousands of dark pixies buzzed up the sky like a cloud of locusts and attacked me.

"Out of my way!"

I turned my whole body into mist and passed them by, leaving behind a iced-over horde of dark pixies. I continued onward into the castle being attacked by the creatures and froze only the dark pixies currently engaging in combat with the soldiers.

"T-the Dark Lady?!"

The surviving soldiers shouted upon seeing me. I was already back to my human form.

"Take the townspeople into the forest, now!"

"W-what are you—"

"You're all the same, monsters! Do you think me a fool?! I won't give away my country!"

A middle-aged man wearing garish clothes appeared from behind the soldiers to interrupt us, approaching me with his sword out.

"I don't have time to explain."

As I swung at him, a single-edged straight sword appeared in my hand to decapitate the man.

This was... the black scabbard sword? I thought I couldn't bring stuff back from Earth. Looked like it followed me by being my kin.

"Governor!" "DAMN YOU!!!"

The soldiers readied their spears, the humans' hostility instantly surging. I calmed them down with a few more decapitations.

"If you want to live, then take your people to escape!!"

I released my presence in intimidation. The soldiers scrambled to run away from me, their eyes filled with terror.

There was nothing more I could do for the people here.

I scanned the place for presences and found the Sapling. I headed directly there, going through any walls blocking my path, then froze and shattered the Sapling.

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Archdemon Lv. 28]

[Magic Points: 77,000/106,000] 6,000↑

[Total Combat Power: 87,600/116,600] 6,600↑

The World Tree sent me another white magic stone. I was also naturally regenerating a bit of magic myself, but overall, my reserve was still slightly going down.

My regeneration was slow, perhaps because of my own evasive movements and high-speed travel. It would have been a huge help if the humans deployed their airships, though considering their attitude, I was quite sure even intimidation wouldn't get them to act.

I jolted. The sudden bad feeling I had drove me to jump upwards with all my strength, breaking through the roof and shooting into the sky. The next instant, the castle I used to be in was scoured into dust by a magical blast.

“Fiorfata!”

[Unseelie Lord□Fiorfata] [Race: Dark Pixie] [Demon Lord]

□One of the seven Demon Lords ruling Netherworld. A god of the Netherworld.

[Magic Points: 578,500/600,000]

[Total Combat Power: 648,500/670,000]

So the sea dragons already lost. The Demon Lord was still nothing more than a black dot above the sea in my eyes, yet I was already feeling the malignant presence all the way here.

Its magic had decreased a little. The sea dragons must have fought

until their very last breath, then...

I swear, your deaths won't be in vain.

I immediately flew southwest. The continent to the north had more countries, but it was also where Fiorfata was coming from, so I decided to start from the south.

I was heading for the large country of Sautonn, the City of Gambling. Normally I would be using the Sapling network to teleport to near Wartos, the City of Pleasure that had long since fallen by my hand, since it was faster that way, but I didn't want to get too far away from Fiorfata. I had no idea what it would do. Besides, it'd be far more dangerous to reveal the existence of the Sapling network to it. The Demon Lord being interested in the World Tree would be the worst case scenario.

Also, keeping the damage to Yggdrasia to a minimum was already one of my goals in the first place. There was no choice other than to keep its attention solely on me.

I turned southwest, and Fiorfata chasing me from the northwest also changed its flight path.

This time around, I needed to cross nearly 500km of ocean. My speed when I wasn't dodging was slightly slower than Fiorfata's speed when it wasn't attacking. It was gradually gaining on me.

Was there nothing else I could do? My impatience grew as the distance between us shrank.

But then, at some point during my flight, I noticed a group of *something* rapidly approaching me from the southeast.

"What is..."

They came closer, and I realized they were a group of some ten-plus monsters running on top of the waves.

They were... eight-legged horses?

[Sleipnir x18]

[Magic Points: 450] [Hit Points: 1800/1800]

[Total Combat Power: 2800]

“Sleipnirs!”

I called at them. The herd neighed in response, and one of them approached me faster than I could move. It ran parallel to me, its back shaking.

“...you want me to get on?” I muttered.

The sleipnir grunted. I immediately jumped on.

“Please!”

It whinnied and *moved*. At the same time, a few other sleipnirs parted from the herd to slow down Fiorfata.

“Sorry... and thank you.”

My steed faintly shook its back. The sounds of exploding water rang out behind me.

The herd of sleipnirs were *insanely* fast, and before I realized, we’d already reached land. With the ground now under their feet, they moved even faster, practically skipping through mountains and forests to bring me inside the borders of Sautonn.

The villages and towns were being attacked by dark pixies. The moment they saw us, the swarm buzzed toward us, every single dark pixies scrambling to be the first to reach their prey.

The sleipnirs weren’t weak, but it’d still be risky for them to be swarmed by the one-hundred-combat-power dark pixies. I let loose cold mist to ward them off.

Just as we approached Sautonn’s capital, an explosion startled me. One of the sleipnirs *burst*.

“Damn it, magic artillery!”

The cannons on top of the city walls began their salvos of bombardment.

They had their own things they wanted to protect, certainly, and I didn’t begrudge them for it. But I had a world to protect, too.

“**[Causality Alteration]** , **[Dimensional Manipulation]** , parallel activation!”

Within the explosive rain, I stretched out my hands to the cannons several kilometers away and squeezed. The soldiers I assumed to be the gunners all erupted in blood and collapsed.

Then I saw other soldiers immediately arriving to take over. I clapped my outstretched hands.

“—**[Gospel]** —”

The dozens of knights and soldiers on top of the walls all crumbled into chunks of meat.

Screams of terror, of horror rang out from inside the walls, but they were silenced by the neighing of the sleipnir I was on.

The herd jumped over the ten-meters-high city walls, protecting me from flying arrows and spells as they invaded the castle, finally bringing me to the Sapling.

“Thank you... this is far enough. Run away everyone, it’s not safe here.”

I hugged the neck of the wounded sleipnir, the steed whinnying painfully, and I said my thanks. I shattered the Sapling and received another white magic stone from the World Tree.

Sautonn’s magic barrier shut off as the city lost its Sapling, and I instantly felt Fiorfata’s magic power. I immediately went outside.

It was right at the moment the far-off Demon Lord fired off an enormous magical blast.

“**[Causality Alteration]** , **[Dimensional Manipulation]** , parallel activation! —**[Nadir]** —”

With a clap of my hand, Fiorfata’s magic blast and my own attack clashed in the middle and detonated, wiping out half of the enormous capital city of Sautonn.

While Shedy was fighting the Demon Lord Fiorfata as the Dark Lady, the corporation announced an emergency maintenance upon their realization of the incident currently ravaging Yggdrasia. The MMORPG *World of Yggdrasia* was temporarily unavailable to login for its players.

Meanwhile, hundreds of players had gathered in a certain overseas private server.

These players were of all genders and age... or to be more precise, the age range began on the somewhat higher side.

They weren't normal players. They were all adults, carefully vetted for their relatively honorable moral compasses, and they had been told the truth. Anxious and at the same time unsuccessfully hiding their anticipation, they stepped inside the

'personal room' that had been prepared for each of them, and they found themselves in a waiting room quite similar to that of the login room of *World of Yggdrasia*. Instead of the tuxedo-clad dog that had been the official guide character, waiting for them there was an awfully chipper stuffed cat wearing a maid uniform with a miniskirt.

"Hellow, and meowcome to the Modification System: Secret World of Yggdrasia! The backdoor login program meowll be starting up soon, so don't go a~nywhere!"

Chapter 85 THE PLAYERS' BATTLE

Due to the appearance of the unknown Unseelie Lord, the MMORPG *World of Yggdrasia* was temporarily closing down its doors to the players.

The total number of registered accounts all over the world was three million and four hundred thousand players, with over six hundred thousands online at any given time. It was one of the leading large-scale MMOs at the moment.

But more and more people had begun to hold suspicions about its overly realistic world and much too *human* NPCs, and some had started to search for the truth. In the world of cyberspace now said to

be even more vast than the real world, some players had reached a certain website with only scraps of information as their only hints.

Among these players, only those with a clear position in society, a rational mind, and a desire for the truth powerful enough for them to be willing to disclose their own personal information would be allowed to sign a special employment contract. So it came to be that several hundred players now gathered at the website for their backdoor login process.

“Is everyone ready?! Right nyow, there’s a super-duper crazy meownster over there fighting with the Dark Lady! You’ll die if it so much as looks at you! It might even get your real body! So prepare yourselves, boys and girls, and we’ll get going!”

With the overly vivacious announcement of their guide, a stuffed cat in a maid uniform, the players stepped foot into Yggdrasia one after another.

Each driven by thoughts of their own.

Even the central region of the Eastern Continent had not escaped the influence of the large-scale magic circle. Swarms of dark pixies were ravaging the area.

With the downfall of the Torrann Caliphate, Katrosvingt took its place as the new largest country on this continent. The country had coordinated with Marsal Kingdom and other neighboring countries to destroy one of the Origin points of the magic circle, and they had succeeded.

As the Dark Lady was currently attracting the attention of the Unseelie Lord, the current most dangerous threat to the world, Katrosvingt and Marsal were allowed a moment of reprieve after they had killed most of the dark pixies on their lands.

It was not an *extermination* — the dark creatures were still a threat to these two countries. Yet even so, they were already beginning to shift their focus away from protecting their citizens, instead making military preparations to defeat the Unseelie Lord and the Dark Lady.

“...what is that?”

The soldiers standing guard on the walls of Katrosvingt’s capital city noticed a group of dozens of monsters of all types approaching.

Monster attacks had gotten much worse ever since humans began to gather mana from the World Saplings, and so this attack was, in a sense, a common sight.

“What the hell...?”

But leading the monster group was something very much uncommon. It was a bicorn the size of a donkey, on top of which was a hellhound as large as a medium-sized dog, and on top of *that* was a chicken-size cockatrice.

The guards even forgot to ring the alarm in front of the absurd sight.

“Wha...”

“What’s that thing?!”

“Hey, the alarm...”

“Waaahh?! ”

Soldiers gathered as more and more of them noticed the abnormality. Then, to their surprise, the monsters all effortlessly jumped over the ten-meters high walls as if they were just stepping over a fence, ignoring the magic barrier.

They were players using the non-militaristic, general-use monster avatars.

The magic barrier normally only allowed humanoids to pass through while repelling monsters. The barrier discriminated between the two not by the amount of internal magic, but by magical pattern.

The magic of humanoids was fundamentally non-elemental, and other elements would only be added afterward. On the other hand, the magic of monsters was fundamentally elemental. This difference allowed the barrier to repel the vast majority of monster types.

The exceptions were monsters under 20 combat power. They had their uses in human society, and so they were exempt from the barrier.

The monster avatars currently logging in through the backdoor program had been reconstructed to be based on the humanoid avatars that the players had as their main characters. Their magical patterns were now indistinguishable from that of humans.

The band of monsters had entered the urban area. Among screams of running citizens, knights and soldiers appeared to intercept them.

"The guards are here! Remember, don't hurt them!"

"Yeah, of course!"

"I'd rather just die than hurt actual people!"

"...I killed some bandits once, you know... the bodies were censored, but I still feel sick once in a while when I remembered how they'd been real people..."

"Must be rough... I feel you, man. I still regret that I didn't stop those idiot players from abusing the demihumans."

"We gotta make up for all those times we've been thoughtless... hey, over there! Spell's coming!"

"Got it! Heyyah!"

A skittering spider-type monster somersaulted to dodge a flame projectile, then shot out adhesive strings to tie up the magicians.

"Ueergh... I'm gonna puke..."

"Obviously. That's what happens when your auto-control's down below fifty percent."

"What else can I do? I can't be that agile if I don't control the avatar myself."

"Why don't you do what they do? I heard they pretty much leave everything on auto-control except for reaction speed, you know?"

The monster avatars turned their gazes toward the Bremen musicians that were the cockatrice-hellhound-bicorn trio. The totem pole were weaving through attacks, playing with the knights as if the humans were bumbling children.

“Nah, they’re just freaks of nature.”

“They’re the devs, right?”

“Yeah. The topmost’s Jennifer, I think?”

“Wow... just absolute madlads.”

The cockatrice petrified only the weapons of the knights and soldiers. ‘Cock-a-doodle-doo!’ it crowed loudly on top of the hellhound. Only the players could hear the human voice behind it: the voice of Jennifer, the self-proclaimed number-one worshipper of the Dark Lady.

“Just a little bit more, everyone! We’re not just liberating the Saplings to save this world, we’re also helping our goddess Shedy the Dark Lady! Come on, let’s show them the power of the unofficial Dark Bunny Lady fan club! Show them the power of the Dark Army! For the Dark Bunny Lady!”

“”””FOR THE DARK BUNNY LADY!!!””””

Soon afterwards, the monsters of the self-proclaimed Dark Army successfully captured the palace and destroyed the Sapling in a landslide victory. The closest it came to casualties on the humans’ side were some injuries among the evacuating people.

The Southern Continent of Yggdrasia had not suffered much damage from the dark pixies. Instead, the demihuman resistance had taken advantage of the narrow window of opportunity to attack the small country of Quantecarl.

The leader of the local demihuman resistance was a feline

beastwoman named Selille. She was cooperating with the Dark Lady, but that didn't mean she was her subordinate.

Selille's purpose was to make the world right once again, and to prevent its collapse.

Once upon a time in the distant past, her ancestors had pitied the fragile human race, allowing them to leech upon the World Saplings. In doing so, they had inadvertently let loose the plague called 'mankind', driving multiple races toward extinction and bringing Yggdrasia into a crisis. It had been her forefathers' crime, and it was what she was now trying to atone.

Many within the resistance had had their families or people they cherished killed by humans. They had sworn revenge in their intense hatred for the human race. Selille, however, did not allow them to kill anyone that hadn't taken up arms.

The sin did not lie in the human civilians. It lay in the weakness of mankind.

Yet at the same time, Selille knew that it was that very same *weakness* that could give birth to kindness.

The Dark Lady of the current generation, the girl of white, had been fighting alone, taking into herself all the hate, the crimes that should have been theirs to bear instead.

According to the demihuman information network across the lands, the foolish humans had summoned a monster as terrible as an Evil God from the Netherworld, and the Dark Lady was now fighting it by herself, keeping its attention solely on her.

There had been another piece of information: the Dark Lady's power would be strengthened as Saplings were destroyed and revived.

If they wanted to aid the Dark Lady in her lonely battle, the resistance could no longer afford to be fight cautiously, keeping their losses at a minimum as they'd done until now. They had to liberate Saplings as quickly as possible.

Selille had to put together a force to free the Saplings as fast as she could while keeping losses low.

Perhaps that was what had made her impatient. Perhaps the thought

that the enemy was only a small country had made her careless.

They had succeeded in invading the palace, but not yet in breaking through the door leading to the Sapling. The delay had given the surviving enemy soldiers a chance to surround them.

Selille had under her command five companies of resistance soldiers. At the moment, the fifth company was tasked with breaking down the door, while everyone else was defending the four corridors that led to this place.

“Commander! The second company had sustained heavy losses, and platoon leader Roden had fallen in battle!”

“One of the third company’s platoons had been attacked. No survivors. The northern corridor won’t hold!”

The number of surviving resistance fighters had dropped below fifty, while the human soldiers and knights gathering outside the corridors were several times that.

Selille too had tried to warn the humans about the disaster that would befall the world if they continued to monopolize the World Saplings. But the humans seemed to equate ‘world peace’ with ‘human prosperity’, and they hadn’t listened to her.

“I never had a chance, do I...”

The human race had tasted the forbidden fruit of unlimited resource. They and the demihumans were irreconcilable.

Perhaps there were some humans willing to listen, but it might take decades, maybe even centuries, until the whole of the human race made up their mind.

There was no guarantee the world could last until then. The Dark Lady had understood that, and it was why she had quickly given up on talking with the humans. Instead, she fought by herself, turning all of the humans’ hatred toward her and her alone.

Selille made a decision. She turned around to her comrades.

“Shall we have a final gamble, everyone? All of us go for the door. It won’t matter how many of us die. As long as the Sapling is destroyed, it will still be our victory.” Selille said, confirming her comrades’

resolve. The beastmen, elves, and dwarves around her simply smirked and readied their weapons once more.

“Then let’s go!”

Selille’s plan was to leave only several people to delay the enemies, fully aware that they’d most certainly die, while everyone else gathered to break open the heavily-secured barrier-door.

But just as she was about to give the order, sounds of a sudden uproar echoed from the northern corridor.

“What happened?!”

Had they broken through? She thought, pulling out her weapons and hurrying toward the area. A pink-colored smoke was filling the northern hallway. Both enemies and allies were coughing, rolling on the floor, their faces wet with tears and snot.

“Poison?!”

“Not really. Just some tear gas.”

A voice rang out from within the smoke. Six person-shaped silhouettes appeared, their faces covered with strange masks.

“Who goes there? Human adventurers?!” “So the humans have hired you to come kill us, have they?!”

As the resistance fighters raised their weapons in wariness, Selille stepped forward.

“Hold!” she ordered her men and turned toward the newcomers, “are you... Isaac?”

She remembered that voice. It had belonged to a young human who she had once crossed blades with. A good man, albeit ignorant.

The group pulled the resistance fighters outside of the cloud of gas. While several of them were applying what looked to be medicine to the downed resistance fighters, Isaac, standing at the front of the group, took off his mask.

“Long time no see.”

“Wha?! What happened to you?!”

On Isaac’s head were animal ears like those of a wolf’s. His fellow comrades followed suit and removed their own masks, revealing the faces of beastmen, elves, and dwarves.

“Weren’t you humans...?”

“Umm, well...” Isaac mumbled, looking uncomfortable and seemingly unsure how to explain. One of his comrades, the scout named Weed with a face now elven, replied in Isaac’s stead.

“Weeell, you see, so we joined the Dark Army, yeah? And we got a chance to recreate our cha-uh, I mean, a chance to reincarnate into a new life, so we did!” Weed said, a frivolous smile on his face.

“What nonsense are you speaking?!” Selille shouted, her bewilderment shared by the resistance fighters.

Isaac walked before Selille and looked into her eyes.

“I’ve been looking for you.”

“Why...”

“We know the ‘truth’ you spoke of now. We also understand why you and Shedy were trying to destroy Saplings.”

“...do you mean to ally with us, then?” she asked hesitantly, “you would fight humans?”

“No, we’re not going to hurt them.”

As soon as Isaac made his declaration, the hitherto silent demihumans once more raised their weapons.

“Hold, men!” Selille ordered, and she turned to stare at Isaac, taking his measure, “...what will you do, then?”

Isaac met her eyes. He spoke without a hint of hesitation.

“I want to protect your people. I want to protect *you*.”

“I-I see...”

The conversation stilled in awkwardness. Moments later, voices rang out behind Isaac to interrupt the silence.

“Hurry up, Isaac! The smoke is running out soon! Don’t we need to deal with the other corridors too?” Weed said.

“We need to open the door, right? Come on, I’ll handle this!” After Weed was the voice of Sandra, the magician.

The resistance fighters lowered their weapons and sighed in relief, seemingly to have accepted the newcomers as their allies, even if these strange people seemed to be... somewhat lacking in gravitas.

Isaac wryly smiled at his friends’ antics. He turned back to look at Selille, the woman still flustered.

“We’re a bunch of misfits, as you can see. Would you still accept us?”

“...I suppose.”

And before they knew it, there was no longer the gloomy air of the last stand they’d readied themselves for. A faint but distinct twitch of a smile showed on Selille’s face.

I panted, my breath heavy with exertion. I’d managed to somehow cancel out Fiorfata’s magical blast before it could hit, but half of Sautonn’s capital still vanished.

But it wasn’t the end yet. Fiorfata was still getting closer to me.

The surviving sleipnir once more told me to get on with a painful groan, even with the deep wounds he’d suffered from the humans’ attacks on our way here.

“Don’t, you’re hurt.”

He suddenly kicked my foot and glared at me with reproachful eyes.

“...I guess you’re right. Okay.”

Intimidated by his gaze, I once more jumped on his back.

I supposed it really wasn't the time to be worrying about his health when the apocalypse was coming. The world would end if I ran out of strength mid-way through, after all.

As I felt Fiorfata's presence coming closer and closer, my steed once more carried me onward. And then, as I was caressing his mane, I suddenly received two more white magic stones one after another.

Was someone helping me...?

A/N: The players have joined the battle. They have an intelligence analysis team to search through everything that every players worldwide have said, and they also have a decent grasp on the resistance's own information.

World map update. The red line is Shedy's path from the beginning of this arc (chapter 80 onward).



Chapter 86 INTRUDERS

My body shook with the thunderous explosions. Fiorfata's magical blasts rained down to create craters dozens of meters wide all around us.

The sleipnir was carrying me southward, all the while weaving and dodging through the Demon Lord's attacks. We were heading to the final city on this small continent, the small country of Oisanonze.

"We're nearly there!"

My sleipnir gave an affirmative neigh.

He would evaporate from just a single direct hit of Fiorfata's blasts, while I'd be damaged quite severely. The only reason why I was still without a scratch was thanks to his speed, and also because Fiorfata hadn't gotten serious yet.

Even when I'd known Fiorfata was a Demon Lord, I'd still thought that I could handle it, if only barely. I'd thought that I could grind down its magic power given enough time, even if it had six times mine.

In retrospect, I had been much too optimistic. I hadn't understood what it meant to fight a vastly superior enemy.

For demons, the amount of magic power they possessed directly tied into their combat power. An attack worth 1000

magic from me could only deal around 200 damage to Fiorfata, while an attack of the same cost from Fiorfata would take away over 5000 of my life.

There was a gap in power, in *pure* power, between us. Furthermore, Fiorfata had existed for millennia, while I hadn't been a demon even for a year. Its experience in manipulating magic power far outstripped mine.

I'd moved the battlefield over here because I had thought the weapons of Earth, being without magic, would have been useless to Fiorfata, but I hadn't expected this level of toughness. Even if the humans here had their magical siege artillery, killing the Demon Lord would still probably take several tens of thousands of shots.

It seemed I had no choice but to deal with it myself. And I would, no matter what it would take.

"There it is..."

Far off in the distance, a city surrounded by tall walls of stone appeared in my view.

I stretched out my hands, getting ready to break the magic barrier with my Dimensional Manipulation. But after a few moments of thinking, I changed my mind.

"Sleipnir... this is far enough."

My steed gave an insistent whinny.

“Please, listen to me.”

Until now, I’d been opening holes in the magical barriers whenever we came to one of my targets to let the sleipnirs in, but my steed was already at his limits from all the shockwaves of Fiorfata’s attacks. I pulled on his mane, forcing the reluctant sleipnir to change his direction, and I jumped from his back toward the city, rolling in mid-air to blast cold mist toward Fiorfata behind me.

The mist was slow-moving. The Demon Lord could easily dodge it if it wanted to, but Fiorfata just charged right through it. The mist wasn’t powerful enough to do anything to it.

But it *was* enough to deal with the dark pixies gathering around the Demon Lord. Fiorfata was releasing miasma and creating more dark pixies just by existing. Even if I’d planned on dragging the human countries into my fight with the Demon Lord, I had no intention of also letting the dark pixies in.

The Demon Lord and its accompanying tens of thousands of dark pixies moved into my mist. The tiny creatures froze the moment they touched it and disintegrated.

“Come and get me, Fiorfata!” I shouted and dove into Oisanonze.

The sleipnir I pulled away was still trying to come to me even when he already looked dead on his feet. I shot off a bit of weak magic to stop him.

This was why I hated making allies who could join my fights. It wasn’t my place to say this, considering how I was already forcing the living beings of this world to sacrifice themselves, but... if someone had to fight... if someone had to be hurt... then it’d be better if it was just me.

My heart was wavering between being a ‘demon’ and the ‘individual named Shedy’.

After its demonic transformation, my heart now valued no other living beings in the material world other than the kins I’d bonded with and the secret alpha testers that had been my fellow victims.

It was why I'd ruthlessly killed, why I'd stained my hands with the blood of my enemies. I understood that to defeat Fiorfata, there'd be many, many more sacrifices.

But all the same... the part of me that had lived for twelve years as an individual still lived on. Even when it understood what must be done, it still balked at the idea of an excessive waste of life.

Was this the price I had to pay in abandoning my humanity to become a demon?

I hadn't the courage to surrender myself to the madness of a demon. Instead, I continued to flounder, trapped in ideals that would never be realized.

"There it is!"

Oisanonze's soldiers had noticed my and Fiorfata's approaches. Magical artillery fired at us from the top of the ramparts.

I was right to have driven the sleipnir away. He had suffered, had been wounded in his pure determination to protect the world, and I didn't want him to be forced to kill his fellow living beings of the same world. After all, I was still here.

A sudden chill ran down my spine. I ducked to the ground without a second thought.

Fiorfata was already out of my cold mist, and it shot another magical blast. It passed above me, vaporizing Oisanonze's walls and the artillery on top of it in an explosion dozens of meters wide.

Just as the attacks stopped, I dashed through the hole in the walls.

Oisanonze was also in the magic circle's area of effect. The city was being attacked by dark pixies.

Yet despite that, none of the people had evacuated. They only realized danger was near when they saw the walls blowing up, and mass panic began to spread through the populace.

"YOU!"

Someone among them seemed to know me. The voice belonged to an

old man who'd jumped out. He was armed.

"Y-you're the Dark Lady! If only you hadn't come—"

"Yes, I am."

I softly replied, throwing out a wide-ranging cold mist to kill only the dark pixies.

"So run if you don't want to die!"

He saw the shattering dark pixies that had been trying to sneak up behind his back. The old man looked at me, eyes wide open.

"You..."

I didn't reply. I turned my demonic Fear skill on full blast and ran toward the palace, giving a final warning.

"Get away from here, now!!"

On the way, I killed the soldiers heading towards me and spared the ones running away. The resistance dropped to nearly nothing once I entered the castle — looked like while the civilians still remained, the owner of the castle had long since left. I easily reached the deepest area and destroyed the Sapling.

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Archdemon Lv. 32]

☐The rabbit demon of Laplace. Trickster and guide of man's fate.

[Magic Points: 118,000/118,000] 12,000↑

[Total Combat Power: 129,800/129,800] 13,200↑

[Unique Skill: <Causality Alteration> <Dimensional Manipulation> <Absorption> <Materialization>]

[Racial Skill: <Fear> <Mist Form>]

[Simple Identification] [Human Form (Wonderful)] [Subspace Inventory]

[Dark Lady]

Luckily, there was a huge magic stone nearby that had been serving as

a mana battery, so I used it to refill myself.

The battery, big enough for me to need both my arms to hold it, still had a bit of power left. I took it outside, punching a hole in the castle walls, and I commenced my attack on the approaching Demon Lord in the distance.


“Causality Alteration, Absorption, parallel activation! — [Nadir] —!”

I absorbed the heat and light of the surrounding, combining the space of nothingness with the mana in the magic stone to create a white ball of magic power inside my mouth. I spat it at the Demon Lord.

The white projectile crossed several kilometers of a city now mostly evacuated, freezing everything in its path. It hit Fiorfata as the Demon Lord was about to enter the city.

But Fiorfata appeared from within the kilometer-wide frozen crater barely wounded. It wiped away the ice on its wings and *laughed*.

[Unseelie Lord  **Fiorfata]** **[Race:** Dark Pixie**]** **[Demon Lord]**

 One of the seven Demon Lords ruling Netherworld. A god of the Netherworld.

[Magic Points: 573,000/600,000**]**

[Total Combat Power: 643,000/670,000**]**

What a freak...

Yet it was exactly that freakish power that was keeping Fiorfata from being serious, to my benefit. The real battle would only begin once I gained enough power for Fiorfata to consider me a real threat, but it was still a long, *long* way away.

...no, this wasn't the time to be pessimistic. I slapped my own cheeks, trying to psyche myself up.

Next up was Sanhuit, an island country to the south. It would be another few hundreds of kilometers of ocean to cross. At least I was a little faster now.

I stepped on the ruins of the walls, getting ready to leave right away. But then suddenly, my unnecessarily-capable rabbit ears caught the whistling sound of something cutting through the air far away.

“...what?”

An explosion rang out.

Far in the distance, a building resembling a clock tower burst open and folded in half. I could hear screams from nearby the collapsing clock tower, probably from people who hadn't gotten away in time.

It was only the beginning. A moment later, the urban area began to be torn apart by a constant rain of explosives.

Who was doing this? The attacks were also hitting Fiorfata, but the way I see it, it just looked like an indiscriminate bombardment.

“Oof...”

The castle where I was at was also hit. I pushed the rubble aside and went outside. There, in the sky far away, I saw some ten-odd flying airships.

Were they the attackers? Why were human airships attacking a human city...?

As I wondered in puzzlement, a voice amplified with magic sounded out from the fleet of airships.

“—We are—the alliance army of—Lansis Empire, Tolldorre, and Luselle Kingdom. This airspace is now—under our fleet’s control.—In order to—defeat the Unseelie Lord—and the Dark Lady, and to cleanse—the dark pixie infestation,—

all upon this land shall be purged.—”

...were they serious?!

Chapter 87 HUMANS

“—Commence the purge—”

The airship fleet of the Lansis-Tolldorre-Luselle alliance had announced their intention to sterilize this whole dark-pixie-infested region to kill both Fiorfata and me. They began their bombardment at my and the Demon Lord’s locations.

“Guh...”

They appeared to be aware of my position the same way that Heroine once sent her subordinates to me so accurately.

Several hundred cannon shots hit the castle, pulverizing it in a blink of an eye.

The explosive rain falling on the city was killing the dark pixies, certainly, but also dozens of times more of the townspeople who hadn’t managed to evacuate in time. Their screams of pain and hatred filled the air.

What were they thinking?

Were they trying to protect the world in their own way? But what need was there for a massacre, to kill even their own people who were only trying to escape?

“...what...?”

A sudden sense of vertigo overcame me, and I held my face with my right hand.

I was fighting to avenge my murdered comrades, and to save the world for the sake of my own savior, the World Tree. I would even take the lives of millions if they proved to be an obstacle.

Since when had I begun to lament the death of others?

It felt as if I had been in the presence of humans for far too long, and now my heart, that which I never had thought to have anything it holds dear, was throwing me an error.

This wasn't supposed to happen... I'd promised the World Tree. I'd sworn that I'd protect this world.

I didn't understand what was going on with myself... All I knew was...

“...this feels terrible...”

Through the gaps between my fingers, my gaze was fixed on the flying battleships. My eyes narrowed, the whites of them turning scarlet, and colors pulled away from my whole body to bleach me white.

One of the battleships flew toward me and began its bombardment.

My foothold crumbled. The building that had been barely holding together now collapsed, the rubble falling to bury me.

I immediately transformed into mist to slip through the debris and flew high up, then turned back to human. My hands clapped with force.

“— [Gospel] —”

My demon's blessing ripped out the magical barrier protecting the flying battleship, wiping out most of the crew. The airship gradually dropped in altitude, finally crashing into the ground in a shattering impact.

As they saw their ally's demise, several other flying battleships began heading towards me. Projectiles of fire and ice were flung from the magicians that had probably been stationed on board as anti-air.

I dodged them with a somersault in mid-air, blasting my cold mist at one of the approaching airships and freezing its external systems. It crashed after a slow descent.

Shooting them down with pure power was taking a lot of my magic. I couldn't continue like this.

Deciding to board them and deal with the airships from the inside, I charged straight at one of the ships, flying through and taking hits from the magical scattershot they were firing at me. I landed on the

deck, freezing the dozens of magicians there with my cold mist.

“No idea where the engine room is... but it looks like the bridge’s that way.”

Spear-wielding soldiers poured out the deck from inside the ship. They held out their weapons while looking awfully scared. They probably didn’t think I’d actually get on. I jumped above their heads and crashed through the bridge’s windows with a flying kick.

“T-the Dark Lady?!”

Inside were a crew member standing in front of a wooden wheel that looked like it was taken from a museum, as well as several navigators. A middle-aged man wearing an extravagant-looking uniform, probably the ship’s captain, gaped as he saw me entering through the windows. He shouted, enraged.

“Wretched rabbit! You dare to stand in front of our conquest?!”

Something was strange in his words.

“...what do you mean?” I asked, “didn’t you fire on the city to kill that thing and me?”

“Hah, isn’t it obvious? Once we’ve purified this land of your and the Unseelie Lord’s foulness, we, the Western Alliance, shall gain supremacy over the Central Continent!”

As the man continued his spittle-laden tirade, he unsheathed a rather garishly decorated sword hanging from his waist.

“You’ve made a mistake coming aboard my ship. No matter how skilled you are at magic, it won’t help you when you’re in reach of my sword! You’ll be a foothold to my own ascendancy, so DIE!!!”

“...ah, right.”

The man swung diagonally downward. I crouched to evade and swept my leg through his own. The black-scabbard sword once more appeared in my hand by itself, and I slammed it through the man’s shoulder to pin him to the ground.

“AAAAAAHHH!”

“Shut up. If you want to save the world, then give the order to shoot the Unseelie Lord right now. I need to kill it too.”

“D-don’t bother tricking me, like hell I can believe the words of an animal!”

Right, so negotiations already broke down the moment I looked like a demihuman...

Then maybe I should just kill him and threaten his second-in-command. As I put more force on my grip of the sword, the skewered man laughed, his face beaded with cold sweat.

“Oh, you’re not going to get what you want. I’ve already announced your boarding to our fleet admiral, a general from Lansis Empire. The magical barrier from the other ships will be coming soon, and elite soldiers will be coming to save me! Your reign ends here, Dark Lady!”

The ship shook with an impact. Just as the man finished his words, I felt myself becoming slightly heavier.

From what I could sense, this barrier being created from the other ships wasn’t the type of barrier that was used to protect cities. It was the stronger type used to cover the palace of a capital.

Yet what came next hadn’t been the elite soldiers as the man had said, but an even more powerful impact. The ship listed.

Someone who looked like a communication officer shouted, their report filled with panic as they fell halfway out of their seat.

“C-captain! The surrounding ships are firing on us!”

“WHAT?!”

The captain screamed and began turning hysterical. Had they intended for this to happen all along, or had it been a sudden change of plan?

“Sir Admiral! I’m still here! Baron Horae is still alive! Please stop the attack!”

The flying battleships’ salvoes of cannonfire sunk their target without giving a chance for any of its crew members to escape. I slipped out as mist just before the airship crashed into the ground and shattered.

“...so they’re going to be *that* ruthless, are they..”

Within the burning ruins of the former city, within the field of corpses of civilians who hadn’t managed to escape, I saw the old man who had been hostile to me when I first came here.

He didn’t get away, then... but for some reason, inside the arms of the old man was a canine beastman boy who looked like a slave, as if he had tried to protect the kid before both of them died.

Had he had a change of heart after I parted with him, I wondered?

I stepped on top of the city’s debris and looked up at the flying battleships.

They hadn’t deployed this fleet to save the world, but for the *achievement of having saved the world*. They’d done it because they wanted more influence than the Central Continent, and not only would they destroy their fellow human country for it, they wouldn’t even hesitate to sink the ship of their allies...

But at the same time, there were still people like the old man who’d tried to save a demihuman child even at the cost of his own life.

Was this what it meant to be ‘humans’...?

In the distance, I could see the flying battleships attacking Fiorfata being shot down one after another without dealing any decent damage to it. Even with so much firepower, the humans could still do nothing more than just delaying the Demon Lord for a moment.

Yet even when the fleet was being dismantled, the largest flying battleship on top of me was still aiming all its cannons at me.

Must be the admiral’s ship, right? Were they still thinking of killing me for their fame and glory even now?

But just as their cannons were ready to fire, a beam of light streaked through the sky to pierce through the admiral’s airship.

“What...?”

The shock rooted me to the spot for a moment. Far, far away, I could

see the silhouettes of some sort of bird rapidly approaching.

“...dragons!”

The dots in my vision were getting bigger very, *very* quickly. Before long, over a dozen dragons of all colors arrived to burn down the flying battleships around me with their breath. Half of them then split off to head for Fiorfata.

From the remaining half came a gold-colored dragon that was visibly larger than the rest. It blew away the debris and landed, its golden reptilian eyes staring at me.

“So, thou art the Dark Mistress of the present. We have heard the Call of the World Tree. Ride upon my back.”

“Wha...”

“Hurry! My brethrens yet delayeth the Demon Lorde, but they shan’t hold for long!”

“Y-yeah.”

Swept along by the force of the golden dragon’s will, I jumped from the debris to their back. Massive wings spread out to bring us soaring into the sky.

“O’ Dark Mistress, whither be thy next destination?”

“South...”

“Hark, all! We are southbound!”

“W-wait!” I said, trying to assert myself as I returned to my senses, “I need to deal with Fiorfata...”

“I am aware. Upon the demise of all but one of mine own brethren hindering the Demon Lorde, it shall be lured to me.” The gold dragon said with a kindly voice.

“But then your comrades would—”

The gold dragon slightly shook their back, interrupting my insistence.

“Worry not. Until now, we have lived unconcerned with the mortal world, even when the human race attempted to take the Saplings for their own. And even if it leadeth to disaster, we, possessors of power supreme above any other, could not allow ourselves to wipe a single race out of existence.”

“But...”

“Hear me, youngling... Now, we limit ourselves no more. Through the wickedness of mankind of this world and the foreigners, a calamity hath come from the Netherworlde. Thou art still but a fledgling. We could not let thee bear the burden all by thyself.”

“...”

“O, Dark Mistress.”

The dragons flying behind us were now circling around me. The gold dragon gently spoke.

“The World Tree worrieth for thee. Thou art not alone.”

“...mm.”

I gave a small nod, nuzzling against the dragon’s back.

The scenery blazed past us. We crossed hundreds of kilometers of ocean in only a few dozens of minutes, and my next destination, the island country of Sanhuit, was coming into my view.

“Come! Give thine order as a Mistress of Dark!”

“...raze the palace, and liberate the World Sapling!”

“We hear and obey.”

The gold dragon roared. The six dragons behind us followed suit with their own howls in concert.

A dragon’s roar was said to break the minds of men, and theirs had driven the streets below us into full-blown hysteria.

We arrived at the palace, turning it into ruins in an instant, and the World Tree once more sent a white magic stone into my hand.

Chapter 88 MONSTERS

“D-DRAGONS!!!”

Dragons had always been a reclusive race, sequestering themselves in *terra incognita* regions of the world such as the Nidh mountain range, and only showing themselves in rare occasions. But now, they’d broken their seclusion in order to begin their campaign of assault upon the capital cities of human countries all over the world.

There had been dragon attacks in the past. To the human race, the proud, regal, and powerful dragons who only ever attacked alone had been a symbol of awe and fear. Regardless, the humans had continued to perfect their magical artillery, and soon they had gained the capability to repel dragons.

But on that day, for the first time, the dragons revealed their true power to the human race.

The dragons that had attacked human cities in the past had been around ten meters in length, capable of breathing fire, approximately ten thousand in combat power, and colored in green and dirt-brown.

But the dragons joining the campaign this time were covered in beautiful scales, as if they were clad in coats of shifting metals and gems: bronze and brass, silver and platinum, rubies and jades. They were much larger, some ranging from fifteen to twenty meters in length, and some were even releasing scorching lasers and bolts of lightning from their jaws as they streaked through the sky with tremendous speed.

Some among them even possessed twenty, nearly thirty thousand total combat power, equivalent to that of a Dark General. The humans trembled with fear as they realized that the dragons they’d fought until now had only been immature ones.

The large country Torbasept and the nearby two small countries on the northeastern small continent had fallen by the dragons. Two small countries on the Southern Continent, Rassept Kingdom and Sarkann, were also attacked by dragons,

and while the two large countries deployed their armies, the demihuman resistance took the opportunity to attack and conquer the small country of Rutohl.

But the dragons hadn't been the only monsters to have taken action.

The Dark General of the Northwestern Continent, the Orc King, and all thirty thousand of his subordinate orcs began to march, putting an end to their inactivity.

The Orc King had only stayed quiet until now due to the three nearby large countries that were keeping them in check: the Empire of Lansis, Tolldorre, and Luselle Kingdom. And if the orc army still decided to march regardless, the Sage at the City of Magic Quarancinq would arrive to deal with them immediately.

At the same time, it was noteworthy that the Orc King still survived despite being surrounded by such firepower. It wasn't because the orcs were powerful, but rather, because of their prodigious number. It was nigh-impossible to wipe them out completely.

And there was another secret reason: Marlene the Sage wanted the glory to be hers alone. In every joint operations with other large countries, she had always been holding back her power to keep the orcs alive.

Trees cracked and crashed, giving way to waves and waves of orcs. The enormous forest trembled under their footsteps.

Orcs were humanoid monsters that resembled boars on two legs. A single, normal orc wasn't much of a threat, with their combat power ranging from 300 to 700. Their evolution, the High Orcs, were only about 1500, while the leaders of orcish forces called Orc Generals were only around 3000 in combat power.

In a comparison of pure combat power with the other Dark General armies — a normal troll had about 500, while an ogre had 1000 — orcs were notably weak. Their strength instead lay in their reproductive ability and their incredibly robust digestion: they could turn almost everything other than minerals and metals into nutrition.

When an army marched, it would need vast amounts of food. With humans, the larger the army, the bigger their supply network would

need to be to transport the necessary food, medicine, and other consumables, and the slower their marching speed would become.

The orcs, however, were even eating the trees they had felled, and any wild forest animals they caught would be consumed alive, bones and all. There was no drop in the army's speed.

“MOOOO!!”

The enormous Orc King raised his battleaxe and roared a furious battlecry.

He, too, had realized the appearance of the Evil God on Yggdrasia. He had also felt the Will of the World Tree, telling him to liberate the Saplings, but he didn't care as much about this world as his grudge against the human race.

Orcs were more than the people's common perception of them. They weren't just crude, savage monsters.

They were fertile because they were weak. They knew they were big eaters, and so they had learned to farm, to cultivate fields, even to raise large herbivorous animals as food.

But ever since the human race monopolized the World Saplings — monopolizing the boons that should have been equally bestowed upon all living beings of the world — the orcs' lifestyle could no longer continue.

Humans stole mana from the Saplings, turning it into military power in order to drive all other races away from the Saplings. That alone hadn't been enough to satisfy them; they had even begun to take anyone not of their race as their slaves, their livestock.

As the humans took mana from the Saplings, the life-force that nurtured the surrounding forests began to drain away.

There had been many, many deaths among the population of the exiled races.

But things got even worse. In just a few decades, the humans had proven themselves even more fertile than the orcs, and they began to invade the orcs' forests to massacre their inhabitants.

“The orcs threaten our new villages and towns.”

“We can use their skins as material and feed their meat to our cattles.”

“If we kill them, we would gain fame as adventurers.”

These were the reasons the humans used to continued their killing of orcs all over the world. In the end, the only large-scale orc settlement left was on this continent.

The Orc King would never, ever forget this grudge.

He had taken the appearance of the Evil God and the subsequent worldwide chaos to be an opportunity.

Just as he expected, his scouts had reported that the humans' flying ships, the terrible machines that had stymied his many attempts to advance his armies, had left for somewhere far away. The Orc King immediately raised his army.

Luckily, there was none of the usual interference from the Heroine. The orcs hated her too, of course, but they detested the whole human race far more.

“The damn orcs are attacking?!”

Lansis's emperor, an elderly man, was in the middle of a meeting to discuss the dark pixies. The shocking news jolted him out of his seat.

“Yes, sir! The western army had already moved out, but as we have confirmed the existence of the supposed Orc King, it is likely only a matter of time before they reach this capital...”

“What the fuck were the lookouts doing?! Damn it, call the battleships back! And where the hell is the Sage?”

Faced with the emperor's terrifying visage, the reporting prime minister paled.

“We still can't contact the fleet, likely due to the distance. Lady Marlene's whereabouts is still unknown ever since the incident...”

“So that foxy bitch really did summon the Unseelie Lord then! Request aid from Tolldorre and Luselle Kingdom, now!”

Out of the ninety-nine countries of Yggdrasia, only two countries bore

the title of ‘empire’: this Lansis Empire, and the Touze Empire of the Central Continent.

They both had an old history, being no more than a hundred years apart in age, yet Lansis Empire had always been seen as inferior to the Central Continent’s Touze Empire.

The twisted inferiority complex of Lansis’s emperor had been the reason why the country had proposed the plan to subjugate the Unseelie Lord to Tolldorre and Luselle Kingdom. They wanted to steal a march on everyone else.

And so, the flying battleship fleet that should have been used to deal with the Orc King was now deployed, together with the commander-in-chief of the military, to subjugate the Unseelie Lord. Only their knights and soldiers were left. Lansis’s military strength had practically been cut in half.

Lansis’s emperor gave the order to ‘request’ military aid from the other two large countries. Went unsaid was the understanding and the *threat* that if Lansis Empire fell, they would be the next.

As the two countries had also sent away their own battleships, they requisitioned civilian airships and the magitech train to deploy several tens of thousands of ‘reinforcement’ soldiers to Lansis Empire.

Despite the fact that both Tolldorre and Luselle had to deal with their own dark pixie incursions and consequently did not exactly have much leeway to help, they understood far too well the inevitability of their own ruin if Lansis Empire fell here. Thus, they were forced to send away most of their reserve force.

The orc army of thirty thousand faced the human alliance army of fifty-eight thousand.

At first glance, the humans were superior in number, if one ignored the fact that they needed three of their soldiers to only barely be able to deal with one single orc.

But the humans were still yet to lose hope. They weren’t defending a village or a small town with only a barrier; they still had the enormous walls of the capital to slow down the orcs’ march, and they had access to magic artillery and the unlimited mana of the Sapling to arm the weapons.

The advancing orc army was being bombarded. Dozens of orcs were blown to pieces with every single cannon shot.

The orcs' strategy was a simple one: do everything they could to allow the King to tear open the barrier, so that they could rush inside. Luselle Kingdom's army had arrived upon the beginning of the battle, as well as Tolldorre's on the following day. It seemed victory was assured for the human side.

"MOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!"

But the humans had not truly comprehended the fury of the orcs, the fury of those who'd had the Saplings' blessings stolen from them.

The orcs still moved forward, consuming enemies to heal themselves and ignoring any remaining wounds. They marched fearlessly, recklessly. None stopped as long as they still drew breath.

The avalanche of orcs, and the enormous herbivorous beasts that they used as their steeds, stared death in the face as they slammed into the barrier.

Upon the overwhelming impact, several magitools sustaining the barrier shattered. The Orc King, himself bloodied by dozens of magical cannon shots, dealt the final blow to the barrier with his two-handed battle-axe Combat Art.

Roaring orcs flooded into the city. Most of the townspeople still hadn't evacuated, and they were cut down mercilessly.

Meanwhile, the Orc King led several of his Generals toward the palace.

The bombardment intensified. Generals after Generals fell. The near-death Orc King howled in mourning, and with the last of his strength, he reached the Sapling and smashed it apart.

The barrier vanished. A fire of unknown origin slowly began to spread through the palace. The Orc King collapsed to his knees, and he let loose a voiceless laugh.

Lansis Empire, the head of the Northwestern Continent alliance, fell,

as well as a majority of the alliance's military force together with it.

With the King gone, the sole surviving Orc General took up his mantle, inheriting the will of the old King to lead the orc army toward the weakened Luselle Kingdom.

“—[Nadir]—!”

Five thousand meters above the sky of the Southwestern Continent, two flying battleships belonging to the large country Soixansept Kingdom disintegrated within the space of extreme cold.

Once I eliminated their air force, two wind dragons clad in beautiful aquamarine scales soared forward. They slipped through the attacks coming from Soixansept's capital to destroy the city's barrier-sustaining facility.

“I'm going!”

I jumped off the gold dragon and dove straight toward the palace. I went through the roof and walls, freezing the knights in my way, and arrived at the Sapling. There were no soldiers there, only a white-bearded old man.

“...you're the king here?”

“I am.” After a pause, the king continued. “Dark Lady Whitehare. Why are you disrupting the peace of the world? Is this not the time for all of us to stand together against the Unseelie Lord?”

“Then free the Saplings right now. It's all because you humans are stealing the life of this world and the World Tree for your own purposes.”

“...what do you mean?”

“Mana isn't infinite. The mana stored inside Saplings are the souls of living beings of this world. Figure out the rest yourself. I don't have the time.”

“...I see.”

His shoulders slumped. As I walked past him, I could hear him whispering. ‘*So the rumors were true...*’ he muttered.

Perhaps one of the demihumans had revealed the truth. But the humans hadn’t believed it... or to be more precise, they didn’t want to admit it, fearing the wrath of their citizens who’d gotten used to luxury.

As I destroyed the Sapling and left the place behind, the icon notifying there was mail being sent from the World Tree appeared in my sight. I touched it, and white magic stones dropped into my hand.

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Archdemon Lv. 42]

□The rabbit demon of Laplace. Trickster and guide of man’s fate.

[Magic Points: 113,000/148,000] 30,000↑

[Total Combat Power: 127,800/162,800] 33,000↑

[Unique Skill: <Causality Alteration> <Dimensional Manipulation> <Absorption> <Materialization>]

[Racial Skill: <Fear> <Mist Form>]

[Simple Identification] [Human Form (Wonderful)] [Subspace Inventory]

[Dark Lady]

That was a lot... were there other people helping me besides the dragons or demihumans, then?

Just as I exited the palace and took a step toward the wind dragon who’d come to pick me up, I suddenly sensed an enormous surge of magic right at the dragon’s feet. It transformed into a huge explosion that blew away half the palace. I immediately used Causality Alteration and Absorption to lessen the impact, but I was still flung through the air.

As I got up from the wreckage, I saw the wind dragon already dead, body mangled and misshapen. A woman was trampling on the dragon.

Her lips twisted in a deranged smile, and she pointed her staff at me.

“Dark Lady! I, Marlene the Heroine, shall be your death today!”

A/N: Map update.



Chapter 89 THE BRAZEN HEROINE

Marlene? The Heroine who'd summoned Fiorfata together with Brian? What was she thinking, showing up now of all times?

At the moment, however, I found myself not quite caring about that.

“...get off.” I growled.

Being trampled under her feet was the still-warm body of the wind dragon that had been fighting together with me, before they were killed by the Heroine.

“Haah?! The hell are you talking about?!” She screeched, slamming her heels downward.

The next instant, the dragons circling in the air let loose a spine-chilling killing intent. Another wind dragon dove down to unleash its rage on Marlene. They suddenly exploded during their descent, blasting off and crashing on the ground outside the city.

What happened?!

During my moment of surprise, Marlene turned the staff she was holding in a strange stance toward me. The ground below me abruptly erupted, flinging me away dozens of meters.

“Tsk, small targets are such a trouble to hit,” Marlene spat out. She swiftly jammed something into the end of her staff and once more pointed it at me.

That wasn’t a staff. It was... a musket gun? I’d thought it to be a staff since it looked different from modern firearms, plus it was made from wood, but on a closer look I could see the resemblance to a rifle.

I didn’t feel much magic coming from the musket itself. However, the *thing* she’d just stuffed inside the gun was giving off a crazy magic signal.

“...what’s that bullet?”

I stood up, getting out of the rubble. Marlene scoffed, her unhinged smile once more showing on her face.

“I wouldn’t have thought a demihuman to know about *guns*. Brian’s got some weird but *really* good ones of his own, but this thing here? We made it in Quarancing by ourselves. It shoots monsters’ magic stones that have been compressed with special magic. It can kill even *you*, Dark Bitch!”

As Marlene spoke, she took out another bullet from her chest. I felt an even more powerful emanation of magic from it than the one before.

“*This* is a bullet made out of a dragon’s magic stone. As you can see, a single shot can kill even a dragon. This thing is more powerful than the magical artillery. Be grateful, animal, I’ve had to gather magic stones for nearly ten years for this!”

Seeing the bullet that used to be a dragon magic stone, the flying dragons all roared in rage. Marlene pointed her gun toward the sky.

“No!!” I shouted, immediately stretching out my hand to squeeze.

Marlene shrieked. But the Causality attack only bounced off her with a spark, together with *something* peeling off of her.

It looked like a talisman.

“I’ve long since prepared for your tricks, rabbit! You’re not so scary if I have my scapegoats!”

Marlene smugly showed off one of her amulets.

A magitool to protect her? But how much magic had she poured into the thing for it to actually be able to defend against me?

“...fight me alone. One on one.”

“Fine. I’ll show you the power of a Heroine. The power of the Sage!”

I told the dragons to stay back with a glance of my eyes. As I got close to her, Marlene aimed her gun at me.

“Why aren’t you fighting the Unseelie Lord? Didn’t you call it up?”

“...shut up. Like hell I can do anything about it by myself.”

“Aren’t you a Heroine? Don’t you have your responsibility?”

“Shut up, shut up!” Marlene shouted in hysterics, unwilling to listen.

“It’s not my fault! ...that’s right, it’s Brian’s! It’s all because of him! They’re not going to put all the blame on me, they can’t! I just need to kill you by myself, and I’ll be forgiven. They won’t do it!”

“...right.”

I didn’t think her name would be cleared just by killing me, but it looked like to her, the reputation she had as a ‘Hero’

was more important than anything else.

Even more important than the lives of others or the fate of this world.

I couldn’t understand her, but there was one thing I *did* understand: I couldn’t let her insanity be the cause of any more suffering.

“Die, Dark Bitch!!”

Her magic gun spat out fire. I had promptly dodged, but the

shockwave still blew me several meters away.

This was difficult to dodge. The blast range was way too big. I landed, rolling on the ground, and I threw a large cloud of cold air at Marlene.

“You can’t hurt me!”

My magic once more bounced off with crackling electricity, removing another of her talisman. Her gun fired off another shot.

“Oof!”

“Stop running, rabbit!”

[Marlene] [Race: Human

] [The Heroine “Sage”]

[Magic Points (MP): 757/800] [Hit Points (HP): 293/300]

[Total Combat Power: 14590]

She wasn’t much different in combat power to the other Heroes, yet the dragons with over twenty thousand combat power still died in a single shot. Which meant the attack power of that gun must be over twenty thousand.

If I assumed that power hadn’t come from the gun itself, then the only other possibility was those magic-stone bullets.

Even I would have been hard-pressed if Marlene was firing it at full-auto, but she always stopped to check the results of each shot. She was showing a lot of irritation each time she missed.

...did she not have much ammo?

If those bullets were made from dragons and similarly powerful monsters, then even if she’d stockpiled them for a decade, I didn’t think she’d have that many.

And perhaps the same went for her defense.

Single-use or not, it was unlikely that she could have an unlimited number of such powerful defensive charms.

“What? Have you finally given up, then?”

Marlene was puzzled for a moment, seeing me suddenly standing stock-still, but she still quickly re-aimed her gun. I waved my fingers at her in provocation. Her eyebrows raised, and she shot at my face.

I kept my eyes on the speeding projectile, confirming its trajectory, and twisted my head just enough to let it pass me by.

The bullet hit what remained of Soixansept's palace behind me and blew it up.

“Wha-?! S-stay still, fucking rabbit!”

Marlene shot twice, thrice, all aiming for my head. I dodged them the same way as before: by centimeters.

If I made a mistake here, I would be in for a world of hurt. Luckily, the speed of bullets was still barely within my capability as long as I knew where they were coming from.

And as I expected, she was a *Heroine*, not a *soldier*.

When I was fighting with Earth's military, the people using explosive weapons never aimed directly at me, instead at the ground under me. They relied on the explosion itself to do damage.

If Marlene started doing that, I'd be in trouble. Luckily, she kept shooting high as a result of me standing still and provoking her.

“Damn it, why...”

After several more misses, Marlene's expression paled slightly as she was about to load the next bullet in.

Was she running out? Or was she worrying that she wouldn't have enough to deal with the dragons if she used her gun any further?

I didn't miss my chance. My hands pointed at her to squeeze.

“AAAAAAAAGGHH?!!”

Magical sparks flew all over her. A bunch of charms peeled off.

How many did she have? Fine then, I just needed to beat her up myself if I had to. As I stepped forward to approach her, Marlene aimed her magic gun, hesitated for an instant, then switched to

casting a spell at me.

“—[**Lightning**]—!”

A bolt of lightning ran from the tip of her finger toward me in a straight line. I could feel that it wasn't going to chase me, so I simply sidestepped it. I arrived at melee range just as Marlene, having not yet learned her lesson, once more pulled the trigger on her gun.

My right hand swatted the gun away, while my knee slammed into her stomach. She coughed painfully, blood spurting out of her mouth as she fell on her knees, her charms scattering from the impact. The gun was out of her hands.

And so it ended... but what do I do with her?

If I let her go and if the humans caught her, she'd probably be executed. But maybe I could use her magical defense against Fiorfata?

With the new idea in mind, I picked up one of the fallen charms, unwittingly Identifying it.

I could not believe my eyes.

“...YOU!”

I picked Marlene up by her neck. She yelped.

“What are you...”

[Scapegoat Talisman] [Defensive Item]

☐A consumable item. Sealed within is a soul of a living being. Serves as a scapegoat to protect user from instant-kill attacks.

☐Material: **[Infant Elf]**

“...and you call yourself *human*?!”

“B-because you... keep using your... weird tricks...” Marlene said, unrepentant even with her face bloodied, her words straining in agony.

“What are humans... what the hell is *humanity*?!”

I slammed her into the ground, eliciting a scream of pain from her,

and once more brought her up by her neck.

“There was an old man over there who died protecting a demihuman kid! Even I knew humans can be so selfless! Yet there are humans killing their own kind, humans like you going around blaspheming the life of others without blinking an eye, all just for fame, for glory! WHY?!”

“...d-don’t care... not... my fault...”

“...right, I see.”

I smashed Marlene to the ground one more time. I searched her chest for that most powerful magic-stone bullet that she’d shown me, and I loaded it into the gun, trying to remember how she’d done it.

“O Mistress of Dark! The Unseelie Lorde cometh! We must depart, hurry!”
The gold dragon warned me from the sky.

I looked toward Fiorfata’s direction, giving it a glare. I then turned to the dragons above me and called at them.

“Go ahead first! I’ll follow you right away after I get a hit in!”

“Art thou certain? It shan’t be simple.”

“I’ll be fine! Go!”

The five dragons hovered uncertainly, but they still slowly flew away in the end.

I picked Marlene up as the woman tried to crawl away. With the magic gun in hand, I flew toward Fiorfata.

“...w-what are you... going to do?”

“Making your death at least be useful.” I coldly replied.

Her face visibly paled.

I didn’t understand humans. It was like they had both an angel and a demon living inside their hearts.

But there was one thing I did know.

Humans were weak. They were overwhelmingly weak compared to other creatures. It was why they sought power in their fear. Their weakness was why they could be kind to others.

Humans must never gain *power*.

And I would remove those who had to keep it that way.

Fiorfata was showing up clearly in my view now. It didn't seem to have lost much of its magic. Upon seeing me, it vibrated as if laughing. It greeted me with an extra-big magical blast.

I dodged it, grazing the projectile. It wiped out a whole forest and a human city upon impact.

It was taunting me, telling me to stop running, to face it head-on.

“Not yet. Wait a bit, and I'll fight you seriously... here, something to tide you over.”

Marlene squeaked fearfully as she felt my rising magic power.

I used Causality Alteration to break open the talismans and free the souls trapped inside. Next, I turned the talismans'

residue and the bullets into magic power, then stuffed it into Marlene to turn the woman herself into a bomb.

“N-no, please...”

And with all my power, I used Dimensional Manipulation and Causality Alteration to throw the struggling woman at Fiorfata several kilometers away.

Marlene flew through the air like a bullet, screaming soundlessly all the while. The moment Fiorfata raised its hand toward her, I aimed and fired the magic gun, using Causality Alteration to make sure I hit the currently-very-volatile woman.

She detonated in an enormous explosion right next to Fiorfata. I was flung away even when I was already several kilometers from the blast.

Aaaah, damn it... I used too much magic.

I turned my eyes toward Fiorfata while my body continued to be tossed around in the air by the shockwave. It appeared from within the explosion unharmed... well, maybe a little harmed this time.

It resumed throwing magical blasts at me. Unable to dodge in mid-air, I took a defensive posture.

But right at that moment, a dragon, white as snow, caught me between their teeth. The beast immediately carried me away, flying as fast as they could.

“...you’re...”

“Do not overexert thyself, Mistress of Dark. I am the last of my brethren tasked with the mission to distract the Unseelie Lorde. Whilst thou hast been most reckless, I expect thy attack to have prompted the fiend to pursue only us for the nonce.

I shall be thy wings henceforth. Thy battle continueth yet!”

“Yeah... let’s go!”

Chapter 90 CONFUSION

The international summit between the heads of state of Yggdrasia's large countries, conducted through the 'clairvoyant mirror' magitools, had been going on for days.

The destruction of the Saplings that were the cornerstones of human civilization had begun with the Dark Lady Whitehare. It had subsequently given rise to an insurrection of demihumans, the *resources* of the human race, and even sabotage in the name of their so-called 'resistance'.

And then, in a treasonous act to mankind, the Sage had summoned an Evil God: the Unseelie Lord. Its manifestation had set off a battle of supremacy between itself and the Dark Lady to determine the owner of the throne of Evil. And as though the floodgates had been opened, the Dark General monsters and even the hitherto silent dragons had joined the demihumans in attacking human cities. Of the ninety-nine human countries, nearly half had already fallen.

While the flames of war had still not yet spread to the Central Continent, the Southern Continent and the Western Continent — where the Unseelie Lord had been summoned — had lost most of its countries, giving rise to a vast amount of refugees and casualties.

The human leaders had engaged in some measure of censorship to avoid panic among the populace, but there had been a particular rumor that was suspected to have been disseminated by the demihuman resistance.

The Dark Lady and the Evil God are aiming for the World Saplings.

The rumor had caused those living in settlements lacking thick, protective walls, such as small countries and rural cities, to start looting food from stores and evacuating. Several cities within the Central Continent were already beginning to be paralyzed.

And finally, the biggest problem was that the gag order was already slowly leaking. A certain piece of information formerly dismissed by leaders worldwide had now become a matter of extreme contention.

The mana coming from the Saplings wasn't infinite, and exhausting it

would bring the world to ruin. Thus, the Dark Lady's objective hadn't been the extermination of mankind as was originally believed, but to build a new World Tree system by destroying the old Saplings.

If this was true, then the Evil of the world wouldn't be the Dark Lady but instead mankind. To humans, those who had prospered due to their monopoly of mana, this possibility was not something they could accept.

But there were dissenting voices, still.

There was information that the Dark Lady gained strength with each Sapling destroyed. In which case, this was simply the Dark Lady rampaging in her desire for power, and once she had it all, all of humanity would be trampled under her feet.

So to preserve the peace of the world, the Dark Lady must not be allowed to gain any more power.

This was the belief advocated by those who believed in the God of the Temples, beginning with the Holy City Ayune.

Nobody knows which was the truth. Perhaps both might be wrong, or both might be right. The only one who could know was the Dark Lady herself.

As war neared their own countries, the heads of state continued their fruitless arguments. And then the alliance of the Academy City of Cinqres and the Marine City of Vingteun poured oil into the fire with a new proposal.

"We, the Academy City of Cinqres, propose to abandon the Saplings to remove ourselves from being targets of the Dark Lady and the Unseelie Lord."

"We, the Marine City of Vingteun, support the proposal together with our neighbors, the countries of Handt and Ouze."

Of course, the idea was immediately decried by many other countries.

"Are you insane?! You would abandon the very cradle of humanity?!"

"Why would you throw away the Sapling's mana?! Have you forgotten the pride of mankind?!"

“And how are we going to explain to our people that they’re going to have to live like animals again after all this time?!”

“Who would take responsibility if monsters attacked?!”

The proposers replied, scoffing.

“What, are you actually thinking you’ll get off lighter if the Dark Lady or the dragons attacked you instead? Dream on.”

“Demihumans aside, we can’t afford to let our countries be involved with the Dark Lady’s fight with the Unseelie Lord.

It’ll be the end for us.”

“There have been reports that the Dark Lady does, in fact, possess some intellect.”

“If the Dark Lady gains strength by destroying Saplings, then why don’t we let her kill the Unseelie Lord for us?”

The pointless argument soon devolved into insults, and the host of the summit, the Pope of the Holy City Ayune, was forced to announce a vote. Only three large countries voted for: the Academy City of Cinqres, the Marine City of Vingteun, and the Free City of Seis. Two countries abstained, while everyone else voted against. The motion to abandon the Saplings failed.

Afterward, the militant faction led by Vingtuit, Battrol, and Quinze Kingdom proposed further deployment of flying battleships, and the motion passed. Thus ended the summit.

The images and sound on the clairvoyant mirror cut off. Within a windowless room, Tischlar, the emperor of Touze, leaned deeply back on his chair. He called for the only other occupant in the room.

“...hey, old man.”

“I am here, young master.”

“That first vote... you know who the *other* abstainee is, right?”

“I believe it is likely to be the City of Medicine, Lantoure. At the moment, most of Lantoure’s neighboring countries had already fallen. They don’t have the resources to support their neighbors and take in

the refugees.”

“Yeah, of course. And Lantoure’s governor fears the loss of their knowledge more than the loss of the Sapling’s magic...

Old man, can you contact Cinqres, Vingteun, Seis, and Lantoure? Make sure *nobody* knows you’re doing it. Oh, and call the ambassadors from Qatore and Quaronze to meet me.”

“...understood.”

“I leave it to you.”

The old butler quietly bowed and left the room, himself already no longer on Tiz’s mind. As he stayed seated in his chair, the emperor tightly grasped the scabbard of the magical sword on his waist.

Together with my new companion, the white dragon, we’d destroyed the Saplings of two small countries named Barrhuit and Barneuf, all the while dodging Fiorfata’s attacks and keeping it on our tails. We were now crossing the ocean to head to the next continent.

The ice dragon flying at our rear had stayed back to delay the Demon Lord. I could hear the booming explosion behind me as the dragon was slain.

“...aargh!”

It had been several hours now. There wasn’t a second when I didn’t see Fiorfata behind us.

It was, in a way, not very surprising when I think about it. Enormous creatures like dragons consumed a lot of magic when they flew, and they were also physical life-forms. They would tire in time.

As the flight of dragons began to flag, they could no longer keep Fiorfata at range. One after another, they stayed back to delay the Demon Lord, and one after another, they fell to the ocean, unable to dodge its attacks.

“It’s going to catch up with us at this rate... Everyone, get away. I’ve recovered quite a bit already.”

“Yet not completely, is it not? Believe in us. We swear upon our pride as the sovereigns of this world that we shall carry thee safely to shore. Do not worry.”

“...”

The dragons... the monsters were much too stubborn. Too pure.

They wouldn’t listen, wouldn’t compromise. No matter how tired or how close to death they were, they’d still fight on for the sake of the world.

Yet if I tried to take them away from the fight here, I might just be doing nothing more than spitting on their pride, their way of life.

...I was still naive, it seemed. If I still feared losses, if I wasn’t determined to walk my path no matter who was blocking my way, I wouldn’t ever win again the Demon Lord.

“Ah.”

The World Tree just sent me more white magic stones.

Somebody else was also fighting for the world, someone whose face I didn’t even know. I couldn’t hesitate any more, otherwise their resolve would all be for nothing.

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Archdemon Lv. 49]

☐The rabbit demon of Laplace. Trickster and guide of man’s fate.

[Magic Points: 107,500/169,000] 21,000↑

[Total Combat Power: 124,400/185,900] 23,100↑

[Unique Skill: <Causality Alteration> <Dimensional Manipulation> <Absorption> <Materialization>]

[Racial Skill: <Fear> <Mist Form>]

[Simple Identification] [Human Form (Wonderful)] [Subspace Inventory]

[Dark Lady]

“...there’s land!”

The sight of the Eastern Continent heartened the dragons, and they managed to make a bit more distance from Fiorfata. I took a short breather and tried to remember what the World Tree had told me.

There were three Saplings remaining in the southern region of the Eastern Continent that was coming into our view, as well as just a few more in the central region.

I relayed the info to the dragons. The gold dragon flying alongside me approached and spoke.

“Mistress of Dark, my brethren had communed with me through our mind connection. They are working with other monsters to liberate the Saplings of the central region of this land.”

“Yeah. The World Tree also told me demihumans and monsters all over the world are doing their part.”

Monsters and demihumans were helping me. My power was growing steadily with every Sapling freed.

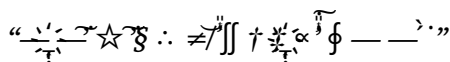
...but would it really be enough? It looked like my power could only get to around half of Fiorfata’s even if all the Saplings were liberated.

Until then, I had to continue grinding away at its magic power, no matter what price I must pay. I had to weaken it into an opponent I could *actually* fight at all.

A sudden ice-cold chill ran down my spine. I shouted before I could even think.

“Get away!”

The dragons immediately scattered from their formation. Fiorfata’s curse, something that almost sounded like a *voice*, rang out not a moment later.

“”

Comets began to fall from the sky like rain, raising columns of water

dozens of meters high as they slammed into the ocean. The range of the bombardment even reached the Eastern Continent in front of my eyes. Far away, mushroom clouds of dust rose into the air.

How powerful had it been? How many lives had been lost? Just a single strike had torn chunks of flesh out of a silver dragon, and their body was now sinking into the ocean depths.

“...Fiorfata...!”

The Demon Lord suddenly changed into long-range attacks, perhaps tired of the chase, or perhaps getting impatient.

I couldn't be careless even for a single moment here, no matter how much distance there was between us.

It was a Demon Lord. The pinnacle of all demons, and one of the gods ruling the Netherworld.

I unwittingly turned around to look at it. Fiorfata was still laughing... so it wasn't going all-out yet. It was why I was still alive, and it was the message it was sending me, telling me it could kill me any time it wanted even without using its full strength.

“Beware!”

It wasn't the magical blasts that Fiorfata had been using to beat down on me, nor was it the large-scale bombardment just a while ago. From its extended fingertip came a beam of light, as if a laser.

“Dodge!”

The higher my combat power was, the faster both my body and mind could move.

Then how much combat power would I need to see the speed of light? The dragons tried to dodge by watching the direction its finger was pointing to, but an unfortunate fire dragon, being less agile compared to the others, got their wings sliced off. As they plummeted into the sea, Fiorfata waved its laser through the body, carving them into pieces like a child playing with a knife.

“Get to ground, now! Fly close to the surface! The dust will scatter the light a little!” I ordered the dragons, even when I knew it'd do nothing more than just giving some measure of perceived safety.

The remaining three dragons still followed my order, all the same. They dropped their speed, flying in evasive patterns, while I let loose wide-ranging mist in an attempt to weaken the laser.

“*Dark Mistress!*”

The gold dragon’s shout reached my ears. Fiorfata was aiming its laser at me and the white dragon I was riding on with pin-point accuracy, probably because my magic had painted a target on me.

It fired—

“HEEEYA!”

And suddenly, a gleaming *something* leaped out from the ground, twisting and turning in the air. The laser was deflected away from me by what looked like a *sword* to instead cut a swath through the forest.

What just... wait, a human?!

He landed right between us and Fiorfata. He flourished, swinging his sword to cool down the red-hot blade. His fingers swept the golden locks in front of his face as he affected a pose, and he pointed the holy sword toward Fiorfata. His blade caught the light as though a mirror.

“Hahahah! Calimero, the apostle of love and justice, is here to bring down the Unseelie Lord! Leave this to me, my beautiful Dark Lady, and go on ahead!”

Chapter 91 THE BLADEMASTER’S BATTLE

The Blademaster Calimero?! What the hell did he mean, “leave this to me”?!

My head was still turned backward as I stayed seated on the back of the white dragon when the sight of a *Hero* wielding the holy sword, his back facing me, entered my eyes. Calimero made his sword dance, the blade so polished it looked like a mirror, and he turned toward me and winked.

“...”

“Mistress of Dark, let us go. Do not let his bravery be in vain!” The gold dragon flying to my side reprimanded me.

“Y-yeah.”

I turned forward.

He was buying time for me, not as a Hero of humanity, but as a Hero protecting the world.

But even with the power of a Hero... no, that wasn't quite right. Rather, I should say that as long as he was human, he would never win against the Demon Lord Fiorfata. The gap between humans and the pinnacle of all demons was far too big.

I wouldn't let his determination go to waste.

...yet on the other hand, for some reason, I felt a strange kind of *sympathy*, not for Calimero but for Fiorfata, the one who was going to have to fight him. I slowly closed my eyes, fingers pressing on my brow.

“Come on, Unseelie Lord or whatever your name is! For the sake of my 12,755 lovers all over the world, I, Calimero, fight as a champion of love!”

The Dark Lady Whitehare and the dragons were gone. Calimero, the Blademaster Hero, swept aside his front locks of golden hair while the fingertips of his other hand twirled the holy sword, the most powerful weapon of mankind that had been entrusted to him by the Holy City Ayune. He pointed the sword toward Fiorfata as the Unseelie Lord calmly approached him, and he struck a pose.

“... ..? ”

Fiorfata stopped moving. It stared at its fingertip, its head slowly tilting to the side.

It had been a moment's fancy when Fiorfata, the Demon Lord,

answered the summon. There hadn't been any particular reason or emotion behind its decision to destroy this world — it was only thinking to 'get some fresh air' after staying in a closed room for years, so to speak.

If there *had* to be a reason, then perhaps it had been the Malice of Men, that which was so attractive to demons.

Sane people wouldn't try to summon a demon. It was exactly that suicidal malice of humans that served as *bait* to lure in demons.

In that sense, the malice that had called up Fiorfata had been quite the amusing morsel. It had accepted the offering and had decided to destroy this world as payment in return, when it noticed something much, *much* more interesting.

A white demon that didn't fear the superior Demon Lord.

She dared to stand against it even when she had no more power than an archdemon, provoking it, gaining more power even as she continued to scurry around. It hadn't had this much fun in millennia. So much fun that it even decided to leave destroying the world for later.

Still, its chase of the white demon was nothing more than a game. It was cornering a running baby rabbit just for fun.

There was no need to get serious.

It wasn't serious, but Fiorfata's attacks — with intentionally limited range, granted — were still enough to inflict near-fatal damage on an archdemon if they hit directly.

And a human had blocked it.

“... 𐄂 *◇' ∫ ..? ”

Fiorfata once more released a beam of light from its fingertip at Calimero, the sudden intruder who was pointing his weapon at it.

The light, as hot as modern laser weaponry of Earth, should have been enough to flash-vaporize the fragile human body.

And yet...

“HAAAH!!”

Calimero shouted and swung the holy sword together with an explosive surge in his magic. The beam of light was deflected away from him to instead cut down a large area of forest to the left.

“... .. ✕ ∴ * √□... ㊦”

Fiorfata once more slowly tilted its head.

This was impossible. Yet the impossible was happening right in front of it.

Calimero hadn't relied on any tricks or special skills.

Faced with an attack as fast as light, Calimero had observed Fiorfata's head direction, the movements of its fingers, the minuscule changes in its magic flow, and he had immediately released the mana he had been focusing and compressing within him, at the same time establishing a magical barrier to restrict the scope of the laser. He wasn't blocking, instead leveraging the reflective property of the material of the holy sword to deflect over ninety-eight percent of the energy away from him.

He did all these within a twentieth of a second. And afterward, to deal with the leftover radiant heat, he intentionally overcharged the mana that he had used to create the magical barrier into a blast to disperse the heat.

If he had been late for just a hundredth of a second, if his sword angle had been wrong, if he had overcharged his magical barrier at the wrong time... any of these mistakes would have been enough to kill him.

Yet the most astonishing thing about him was his ability to carry out his actions. The unbelievable *courage* to stand tall in front of an enemy over forty times more powerful than him had been the reason Calimero still lived.

Many would have been content to simply wave off what he did, saying it was just because he was a 'freak', but at the same time, one could say his achievements had only been possible purely due to his inborn gifts.

He was a true genius born of Yggdrasia, and the most powerful Hero of all history.

This was the truth of Calimero.

Still, it was true what they said. There was a fine line between genius and... whatever he was.

“Hahahah! Is that it, Unseelie Lord?! If so, then you will never be able to defeat Calimero, the guardian of love!” He loudly exclaimed, displaying a handsome smile while his fingers swept across his bangs.

For a moment, Fiorfata stilled.

No one could understand what it was thinking. A two-dimensional being could not ever hope to comprehend one living in the third.

But still, Fiorfata *grinned*. The miasma clinging to the Demon Lord turned pitch-black, and the obsidian egg it had for a head cracked apart in a grin no one had seen until now.

“WhooaaAAA?!!”

Fiorfata expelled beams of light from all of its left-hand fingers, tearing apart the whole area where Calimero was. The mushroom cloud reached as high as three hundred meters, and the dust was thick enough to block out the sun. A flash of sharp light pierced through the cloud, only to bounce off of Fiorfata’s head and vanish.

“Did you actually think that was enough to kill me, Calimero?!”

Calimero, the hero of light, danced in the air as he sliced apart the cloud of dust. His clothes and armor were grimy with dirt and mud, but there wasn’t a single speck of dust on his face and hair.

Out of the six lasers coming out of Fiorfata’s fingers, Calimero could only parry two. But the deflected beams had hit the others, changing their paths, and he had even utilized the explosion caused by the projectiles hitting the ground to jump and take refuge in the air.

Even Calimero himself wouldn’t have been able to explain how he had

done it.

The man possessed the calculation ability to create intricate solutions in a blink of an eye, as well as the capability to carry it out without a moment's hesitation. But he was also incorrigible.

“For the sake of my 12,756 lovers all over the world!”

At that moment, the cloying miasma surrounding Fiorfata abruptly turned a shade blacker.

A hail of comets rained down on Calimero as if the whole sky had fallen, turning the shoreline of the Eastern Continent unrecognizable. But even inside the localized apocalypse, Calimero still laughed, his cheerful voice unfaltering.

At first glance, he seemed to be on equal grounds with Fiorfata, a demon some would call an Evil God, yet this was not so.

Calimero was making hairline dodges of attacks that would kill him with only a scratch, while his own attacks couldn't deal even the least damage to Fiorfata. While the Hero was still unharmed, the magic power that he needed to dodge wasn't infinite. The magic stones and magitools he'd prepared were slowly but surely depleting, and Fiorfata's attacks were grinding his life down.

Why was Calimero continuing with such recklessness, then?

“Come on! Don't hold back now, Unseelie Lord!!”

It was to buy time, and it was to lower Fiorfata's magic power as much as possible.

By *instincts*, Calimero had known that the Dark Lady Whitehare wasn't his enemy. And by *instincts*, he'd known that taking her as his lover would bring peace to the world, which had been the reason why he had continued to pursue her until now.

Blows after blows struck him. As Calimero stood battered and bruised, Fiorfata released an enormous magical blast at him.

The Hero swept his pristine bangs aside with bloodied fingers. He smiled gently as he looked into the approaching mass of magic power.

“...my beautiful Dark Lady. The rest is up to you.”

As long as he succeeded in weakening Fiorfata’s magic and combat power, he was sure the white girl would win. So spoke his instincts of a Hero.

The massive magical projectile crushed into Calimero, his smile still unwavering until the very end. All that was left behind was an immense crater.

“.....† ∴-π? ”

Upon the sight, Fiorfata faintly tilted its neck to the side... and then it left once more to resume the chase.

On a land now scoured of all moving creatures, the holy sword tumbled through the air to stab into the ground. It shone, catching the light as though a gravestone.

Chapter 92 EVOLVING POWER

I had left the battle to the Blademaster, Calimero, to head for the Republic of Sondoze. By now, there were only three dragons accompanying me.

I glanced backward. I could sense the intensifying magic power of Fiorfata, and I could hear the rumbling explosions behind me.

Was Calimero still fighting? Or had he already fallen...?

“What troubleth thee, Dark Mistress?” The gold dragon asked.

“...nothing.” I shook my head.

I’d had some history with Calimero, but that didn’t mean I wouldn’t wish him well. Even if he couldn’t win, I also couldn’t imagine him losing very easily. I looked forward, focusing on our journey ahead.

“...mm?”

Suddenly, the World Tree sent another white magic stone into my hand.

Judging from how it felt, this was... the Sapling at Swantol Kingdom? The large country several thousand kilometers to my west. I didn't know who did it, but they would probably head for the small country of Xantecinq to the east of Swantol next. In that case, should I meet up with them and head for Xantecinq together after I finished with Sondoze?

...no. If Fiorfata caught up, both Xantecinq's people and my allies might just be wiped out.

What should I do? Do I leave this continent to them? That would probably be the path of least casualty. However, this conflict was supposed to be concluded with me asserting myself as the Evil of this world. A part of me was reluctant to get others involved.

"Dark Mistress! My brethren hath sent me a telepathic message. Flying ships of human are coming from the Central Continent!" The gold dragon said, worry and nervousness lacing his voice.

"What?!"

I immediately contacted the World Tree. Images of a far-off fleet of over a dozen flying battleships crossing the ocean were sent to me from the new Sapling of Quanneuf, a country near the sea.

Judging from the angle, they were coming right for us.

Hopefully the fleet was aiming for Fiorfata. Considering how they'd attacked the dragons, though, they might still decide to focus on me and my helpers once they arrived instead.

"Change of plans! We'll leave the Saplings of this continent to our allies while I head for the fleet!"

"Shalt thou fight?"

"...I'll check out their intentions first."

I had made a decision to destroy the rampant civilization of humans. But if these people really understood the threat the world was facing,

if they really were fighting for the world instead of for their own selfishness... then I would want to see if they were sincere.

The dragons told me they'd follow, seemingly thinking it'd come to a fight. They should have been near their limits by now, with how much flying they'd done... really, so stubborn.

We changed our course to head for the Central Continent.

Both the airships and the dragons could fly as fast as a passenger plane of Earth, so I expected we'd come in contact with the human fleet in this continent.

I sensed Fiorfata's magic signal chasing us just as we changed our direction... the Demon Lord was about thirty minutes away from us, it seemed. Not that far, but not close enough for it to attack us directly either.

On Yggdrasia, the sun rose in the east and set in the west just like Earth. We'd been flying all the way west from the Western Continent, and it was under the still-bright sky that I saw the fleet of over a dozen ships slightly to our south.

"Dark Mistress, the humans are attacking someone!"

"Hurry!"

I could hear faint sounds of magical artillery now. The place I saw far off in the distance should be Swantol Kingdom, the country that had just lost its Sapling a short time ago, but the fleet was shelling the town from some distance away.

My breath hitched the moment I saw what they were shooting at.

Human refugees. And protecting them was the demihuman resistance. I jumped from the dragon's back, using teleportation to get there as fast as I could.

"— [Nadir] —"

I created a space of extreme cold, targeting the center of the fleet the moment they entered my range. My attack didn't directly hit any ship,

but it had caused a turbulence, forcing the fleet to stop shooting as they stabilized themselves. I continued flying, ignoring them, and I landed next to the demihuman resistance.

“M-milady!”

“What’s going on? Why are the humans shooting refugees?”

One of the elves was about to answer, a wince on his face, but he was interrupted by another voice coming from a pair of silhouettes, one large, one small.

“They claimed that they were only attacking the resistance,” said the smaller one, a girl.

“...it’s you.”

She was one half of the twin elves I’d rescued at the auction back then. Beside her wasn’t her brother, but instead someone I knew very well.

“...a Hero?”

“...it’s me. It’s been a while, Dark Lady.”

He was the human Hero who’d stayed until the end to fight for the people. He was... Gold, right? Considering he was with the demihuman resistance, he must have found his own *truth*.

But this was no time for contemplation.

“Are they shooting the refugees because they’re staying with you?”

“...yes. We’d implored them to take in the refugees, but then they suddenly began shooting at all of us, even the townspeople.” Gold replied.

“They said everyone here were resistance, with no exceptions.” The elven girl said.

So the top brass of humans were all like that, then...

“I’ll deal with the human fleet. Meanwhile, you should run into the forest.” I said.

“Are you going to fight by yourself...? Absurd! I’m going with you!”

Gold said heatedly, stepping forward with a hand on his sword just as I thought he would.

I put a hand on his shoulder to stop him.

“Fiorfata is coming here in about thirty minutes. You understand, right? Get away from here, now.”

“...got it.” Gold relented, feeling the power disparity between him and me. With just a single one of my hands, he hadn’t been able to move an inch before I released him.

The fleet far off in the sky had regained their balance. They were about to resume their bombardment.

I turned myself into mist and flew upward to attract their attention. Once I made sure their cannons were aimed at me, I used teleportation to approach the fleet. I tore apart the barrier covering the largest airship and broke into the ship’s bridge.

A fearful commotion broke out among the crew members. An elderly man, likely the captain, shouted at them.

“Stop panicking! Lower your weapons!” He ordered and stepped toward me. “I am admiral Rhodon of Quinze Kingdom, and I’m in charge of this fleet. Might you be the Dark Lady?”

“...yes, I am.”

He seemed like such a calm, gentle man.

Why was he shooting at the refugees, his fellow humans? Was he really the man who’d given the order? I’d stormed the ship with full intention to kill, but the admiral had not been what I expected at all, and before I knew it, I was already listening to him. Rhodon shook his head with a pained look on his face.

“You must have come here to condemn my decision. But I had no choice. There was no way to know if there were demihumans hiding among the refugees, and if I take them in, I risk our ships being sabotaged. We wouldn’t be able to fight the Unseelie Lord then.”

We were silent for a moment as I gathered my thoughts. They were prepared to make their own sacrifices for the sake of the world, was that it? Was that what he was saying?

“You don’t have to worry about Fiorfata, I’ll deal with it. You just take the refugees. I’ll talk to the demihumans.” I offered.

“Oooh, that would be wonderful. Let us save lives, then. It is, after all, our true duty.”

Rhodon smiled the smile of a gentle old man and nodded profusely.

...was it true? Had they really come here to protect the world, nothing else?

“Then get the refugees on your ships and get away. Fiorfata’s coming soon.”

“I understand.”

I left the bridge to go to the ship’s deck, and from there, I jumped on the back of the white dragon who’d come to pick me up.

“Danger!”

But just as I landed on their back, the white dragon suddenly twisted their body to cover me, and not a moment too soon.

A terrible impact blew us away.

“Gah!” I coughed, regaining my vision and my balance in the air. The first thing I saw was the body of the white dragon falling toward the ground. They were already dead.

“Dark Mistress!”

The bombardment continued. The gold dragon and another dragon flew to cover me with their own bodies.

What just happened?!

I turned to look at the battleship. Rhodon was still looking at me with that same gentle smile.

But when I focused my eyes to *look*, for a single moment, his face blurred to instead reveal a gross smirk.

“A Child of God...?”

He must have been one of those Children of God, like Tiz, those who possessed a special ability. Something that could make others believe in him, or maybe to hide his true thoughts... damn him.

The gold dragon was still alive, but not for long. His voice reached my ears as I was about to lose myself to my anger.

“...*Dark Mistress.*”

“No! I’m sorry, if I hadn’t—”

“...*do not... be swept by the malice of humans... do not lose sight of thy goal...*”

“...I got it.”

The dragons had all died protecting me.

Do not lose sight of my goal... to protect the world? But it had been my fault... you died because I was careless...

*...I understand. I won’t forget... I’m sorry, gold dragon, I won’t **hesitate** any more... so let me be angry for you, just this one time.*

Right then, a hail of magical artillery rained down upon me. My magic power slowly decreased from the damage.

...but something inside of me *clicked*, and suddenly, my mana reserve shot up.

“— **[Consume]** —”

I raised my right hand. All the projectiles gathered there as though being sucked in by a black hole, transforming into a massive ball of energy.

I wouldn’t hesitate any more.

I threw the energy ball back. Rhodon’s face twitched, and the large battleship was disintegrated in a blink of an eye.

[Shedy] **[Race:** Bunny Girl] **[Archdemon Lv. 50]**

☐The demon of Laplace. One who had ascended beyond an

Archdemon.

[Magic Points: 107,500/172,000] 3,000↑

[Total Combat Power: 124,400/189,200] 3,300↑

[Unique Skill: <Causality Alteration> <Dimensional Manipulation> <Consumption> <Materialization>]

[Racial Skill: <Fear> <Mist Form>]

[Simple Identification] [Human Form (Wonderful)] [Subspace Inventory]

[Dark Lady]

Chapter 93 TO THE FINAL BATTLEFIELD

...‘Consume’? My words surprised myself.

I thought I was using **[Absorption]** . The power I’d inherited from No. 17 could be used to absorb the mana from my surroundings, but more than that, it also worked with heat and kinetic energy. And just like how the creatures of this world could gain a part of the magical energy of those they defeated, this power was capable of stealing the magic and life-force of others to turn it into my own.

Using it to steal power from others, however, was most efficient when I directly touched my target. ‘Absorption’ wasn’t supposed to be able to turn enemy spells into mana for me to take.

And yet I had managed to gather the magical artillery projectiles the battleships shot at me in my hand and threw it back at them. I’d done it so naturally, without a second thought, as easy as walking or breathing.

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Archdemon Lv. 50]

□The demon of Laplace. One who had ascended beyond an Archdemon.

[Magic Points: 107,500/172,000]

[Total Combat Power: 124,400/189,200]

[Unique Skill: <Causality Alteration> <Dimensional Manipulation> <Consumption> <Materialization>]

[Racial Skill: <Fear> <Mist Form>]

[Simple Identification] [Human Form (Wonderful)] [Subspace Inventory]

[Dark Lady]

...my Absorption ability had evolved, just like how Causality Alteration and Dimensional Manipulation had.

And my description also changed a little bit. I'd ascended beyond an Archdemon...? Was this something similar to a Rank-up, not an Evolution?

What had caused these changes? Had it been because I'd reached level 50? Or had it come from the anger I felt upon losing the dragons?

Both my magic and total combat power hadn't drastically increased like my previous evolutions or rank-ups. But I could feel something like a *core* forming inside of me.

It felt as though the tree log I'd been swinging around all this time was now a weapon made out of metal with the same weight... or maybe like the oil fire was now a gunpowder blast... I wasn't sure how to describe it, but well, it felt like my very existence had reached a higher level.

The loss of Admiral Rhodon's ship had sent the fleet into momentary panic, but they were already recovering, reforming their formation and aiming all their guns at me.

Were they *really* doing this? I narrowed my eyes. I stayed silent, stretching out my hand toward the fleet in the sky and squeezed.

Space *creaked*.

The next moment, fire burst out from the engine rooms of two of the ships. One exploded in mid-air, while the other one dropped out of the sky, slamming into the ground and shattering into pieces.

In a world relying as much on spells and magic circles as Yggdrasia, complex machinery, such as the magitech engine, was a new field, and as such was still rife with defects or instabilities. The machines only continued working because the arcane aspect of the design were *forcing* them to. And when dozens, *hundreds* of such defects suddenly worsened at the same time, what came after was a foregone conclusion.

What happened was a result of my newfound ability to use Causality Alteration even through their magical barriers.

Although I was honestly quite surprised at how many of the ships were actually quite well-made.

The ships repeated their salvos. The explosions themselves were a little bit painful, but now that I could consume magic power from the projectiles, I wasn't just taking zero damage — the attacks were actually *healing* me.

"I don't need this much, so you get them back."

I gathered the excess magic power and the force of the explosions in my hand with **[Consumption]**, adding some of my power, and lobbed the magical blast back at them.

Three more ships were now covered in flame. They lost their ability to stay afloat and crashed.

"Mm?"

I heard a whistling noise. I dodged with a short-range teleportation, and an enormous iron harpoon shot through where I used to be. I'm guessing this was for towing large creatures? Looked like the fleet changed into using simple physical weapons after they realized I could return their magic back at them.

"...in that case..."

I turned into mist and zipped toward the fleet. I still received a bit of damage even when I was incorporeal, but with my current power, it wasn't enough for me to care.

I approached one of the ships. Its rudder turned in a hasty attempt to dodge while another of its harpoons were shot at me.

I enveloped the four-meters-large harpoon as mist and turned back to human form, using Dimensional Manipulation to offset the inertia and Consumption to devour the kinetic energy. Then I used the enormous lance as an impromptu blunt weapon to bash in the ship's bridge.

As I stood on the wreckage of the bridge, an arrow whiffed my cheek. It had come from the soldiers on the deck of a few other ships that had gotten close.

Well, if they're offering themselves as sacrifices...

I swung the harpoon to knock away the subsequent arrows, then flooded the two ships with mist of extreme cold, freezing them into a single falling lump of ice.

The fleet had lost half of their numbers in a blink of an eye. They began to retreat.

It was less a retreat and more a *rout*, really. I ignored most of them to head for the single ship that still stayed. It was the same kind of large battleship as Rhodon's.

Several men had gotten out to the deck with hands behind their heads.

What were they thinking? I threw the harpoon into the walls of the bridge, covering the slowly-approaching ship with cold mist, and I landed. The moment I did, the men wearing officer uniforms on the deck all dropped down, their heads touching the deck with hands still locked behind them.

They looked like they were... prostrating themselves. If I remembered correctly from the information package that had been downloaded into my brain in the very beginning, this was the sign of surrender for humans of this world.

"...what are you planning?"

"Dark Lady! Please stay your hands! We do not wish to fight!" An older man said hastily, looking desperate. The ship's captain?

"What are you talking about now? Didn't you attack me?"

"W-we were just following Rhodon's orders! We did not want to be your enemy—"

"And you kept attacking even after he was dead."

"T-that is... H-how will you stand against the Unseelie Lord if you don't have us?! Without our help, you can't—AGH!"

As the captain began to run his mouth, I shut him up with a kick, hurling him away and shocking the other crew members into silence. I looked down on them and spoke frostily.

"I'll deal with it myself. I don't need humans."

I covered my hands with mist. Armed soldiers jumped out from their hiding spots on the deck.

I released my mist to turn them all into statues of ice. The captain took out the handgun he'd hidden, aiming it at me, even as he was already half-frozen. Ice covered him whole just before his finger could pull the trigger, and he took his last breath with an expression of fury on his face.

What a farce, setting up an ambush while they pretended to surrender. Not like I had any intentions of accepting the help of humans anymore anyway, even if they had been sincere.

What should I do with the escaping ships that still remained? I was quite sure they'd be destroyed by my hands one way or another, but I had to deal with Fiorfata right now. I didn't have the time.

But while I was occupied with my thoughts, a beam of laser flashed in front of my eyes, shooting down the escaping ships one after another.

Damn it... it already caught up!

[Unseelie Lord□Fiorfata] [Race: Dark Pixie] [Demon Lord]

□One of the seven Demon Lords ruling Netherworld. A god of the Netherworld.

[Magic Points: 523,000/600,000]

[Total Combat Power: 583,000/670,000]

...that was quite the decrease in magic power. Calimero must have gone all out, then.

On top of the thick forest of the Eastern Continent, the two of us faced each other over a distance of several kilometers.

The Demon Lord must have noticed the gain in my power. It cackled, its body trembling in amusement.

A chilling cold ran down my spine.

The miasma dripping from Fiorfata covered the forest below us, turning the land a rotting black in a blink of an eye and spawning a vast amount of dark pixies.

Fiorfata had finally decided to be serious. Its attacks were going to be deadly... no, *cataclysmic* from now on.

In response, I pointed my hands at it.

“Causality Alteration, Dimensional Manipulation, Consumption, parallel activation!”

Just combining three of my evolved abilities together was already taking a huge chunk out of my magic reserve.

“— [Absolute Nadir] —”

I clapped my hands together. A space of absolute zero formed right in front of Fiorfata, expanding into the shape of a perfect sphere with a radius of several kilometers.

Tens of thousands of dark pixies were turned into diamond dust in a flash. Fiorfata was being covered by the cold mist, and the white world slowly engulfed him.

But not for long.

Crack! The sphere of absolute zero was broken with countless beams of light, forcing me to twist and tumble through the air to dodge. Fiorfata once more appeared from the world of white, a bit of frost clinging onto its body.

I still couldn't win yet... but I could dodge its attacks now.

And I knew that my cold mist was now capable of slowing it down, even if only for a little bit.

Come on, then. Chase me until I can win.

Before Fiorfata started moving, I left for the ocean. I headed for what would be our final battlefield: the Central Continent.

Chapter 94 MONSTER ASSISTANCE

The war between the Unseelie Lord, the Evil God that had manifested itself from another world, and the Dark Army, led by the Dark Lady Whitehare, had intensified.

Or to be more precise, the war was between the Unseelie Lord and the

Dark Lady alone while the Dark Army, being less an organized army and more a ragtag band of demihumans and monsters who were fighting for the same reason as the Dark Lady's, attacked cities to liberate Saplings. The battle had gone far beyond the capability of humans, and both the battleship fleets of the Western Continent and the militant faction of the Central Continent deployed to defeat the Unseelie Lord had been annihilated.

The demihuman resistance force had further swelled in number, and with the dragons now participating in the conflict, the three countries of Cirquesant, Mersept, and Garbandeux, located in the central region of the Eastern Continent, had now fallen. On the northern side of the Western Continent, the remnants of the orc army had assaulted and brought down two small countries.

This had helped the Sapling-abandonment faction consisting of the Academy City Cinqres, Free City Seis, and Marine City Vingteun to gain further traction, with the City of Medicine Lantoure now joining them. This had resulted in some countries beginning to seek peace with the demihumans, at long last, who were willing to accept releasing their Saplings as a condition in order to secure their citizens' safety.

All the same, there were countries who still hadn't given up — in other words, leaders who hadn't been able to stand against the public voice. They wished to continue the war to the bitter end, but as the final Dark General, the Ogre Lord, still remained as a threat, not many among them could spare the military force.

I spun and twirled in the air, barely dodging the lasers as they tore apart the ocean, boiling the seawater and creating a huge cloud of steam.

"Hahh!!" I shouted in effort, freezing the steam with my mist, and I threw the hail of ice spears toward Fiorfata.

“◇ ♪ ♪ ♪ § § † † α”

Fiorfata again used its black miasma to evaporate them all in an

instant. The very next moment, a meteor shower fell from the sky, its range covering everywhere I could see. Countless enormous pillars of water erupted from the sea as the projectiles slammed into the ocean surface.

“— [Nadir] —”

I formed limited areas of extreme cold, creating regions of disconnected spaces to reduce the damage to me. It was reckless, equivalent to blowing myself up to reduce the force of an external explosion, but it was still far better than getting hit by Fiorfata's attacks directly.

I had been crossing the ocean for the last twelve hours on my way to the Central Continent, all the while trading blows with Fiorfata.

Although it wasn't exactly an equal fight. The power gap still existed between us, so it was really more like an attack helicopter chasing around an infantry soldier with a gun. At least now I could dodge Fiorfata's attacks, and my own were affecting it a little bit.

I continued flying, the ocean behind us raging as the water boiled and froze in rapid succession. After some time, a black line far away on the horizon appeared in my sight.

“...there it is!”

I could finally see the Central Continent.

I turned away from the island country closest to me, the Marine City Vingteun, to avoid bringing danger to the World Tree. Instead, I moved to enter the continent from the north.

As I approached the Central Continent, I was greeted by another airship fleet from some country somewhere from the landmass. The difference, however, was that this fleet was a lot smaller than the previous ones. Looked like the humans were finally running out of ships.

Three battleships approached. They shot their magical artillery at me, as I was flying in front.

And I felt a surge of powerful magic from behind me at the same time. Fiorfata was creating an enormous ball of magic power.

[Magic Points: 495,400/600,000]

[Total Combat Power: 555,000/670,000]

Still a long way away... but the gap was surely closing.

Now that it'd gotten serious, Fiorfata was consuming more magic than it recovered.

I left the frozen sea behind me and headed for the Central Continent, the land visible in the far distance. Not even seconds later, hundreds of beams of light shot out from within the ice, shattering the frozen ocean in an instant. As glittering fragments of ice fell to the sea, Fiorfata appeared, swiping at me with several lasers.

I rolled, looping in the air to dodge them. I could probably block a few lasers, but I didn't have the guts nor the skill to parry them like Calimero had with his sword.

Upon entering the Central Continent, I headed right for the small country of Dansix.

There were less people than I expected. They must have evacuated. The only people walking the streets were soldiers, and there wasn't a single soul on the road leading toward the palace. I entered the city's center with zero opposition.

“— [Nadir] —”

Just as I unleashed the ball of cold air to freeze half of the palace, Fiorfata's magical blast blew away the other half. The World Tree sent me another white magic stone.

So that was one country down without much fanfare. My next target, however, was going to be Varringt: a large country of the Central Continent.

Unlike the large countries I'd done the same to until now, I was probably going to have problems using brute force to deal with the large countries of the Central Continent. I expected their population and their military to be vastly superior to the other continents, and so I readied my resolve to once more take the lives of so many.

But just as I got close enough to Varringt for the capital city to be visible, what awaited me hadn't been the orderly rows of soldiers that

I'd expected. Instead, it was a ruined city.

"...huh?"

...what happened? As I entered the city's airspace, I saw a *lot* of dead soldiers filling the urban area. Mixing among the human bodies were corpses of some kind of savage-looking monster.

Had these monsters attacked the city? Both armies were similarly annihilated, the battle seemingly ending in a draw. As I headed for the center district, however, I saw one of the monsters, one that was much larger than the rest, standing on top of a fallen palace.

Is that... an ogre?

[Ogre Lord] [Dark General]

[Magic Points: 1215/1250] [Hit Points: 3640/3700]

[Total Combat Power: 38800]

A Dark General... the Ogre Lord.

His combat power was pretty much equal to being a Dark Lord himself. I slowed down my flight, reflexively raising my guard in front of the Ogre Lord that I assumed to be the one to have brought down Varringt. But I soon found out I didn't need to.

He stood, a greatsword at rest on his shoulder, and he gave me a silent flick of his head. He was telling me to go ahead.

"..."

My eyes met the sincere gaze of the Ogre Lord, and I flew forward, leaving the palace behind me.

As a living being of this world, he, too, was going to help me, putting his life on the line to bring down as much of Fiorfata's power as possible, just as Calimero had.

I squeezed tight my eyes in prayer for the Ogre Lord and moved onward. It was up to him now.

Several minutes later... I sensed Varringt's capital disintegrating in an explosion far behind me.

Once more, I closed my eyes for a few moments of mourning for the Ogre Lord. I received the World Tree's gifts.

“...huh...?”

There were three of the white magic stones this time.

From the reaction of the stones, I knew they had been Saplings of the Central Continent. If one had been Varringt, the country I'd just passed by, then where were the other two...?

At the same time, two small countries to the west of the Central Continent were being attacked by weak monsters. They had been so weak that the barrier was likely to dissolve them upon contact, but the monsters had been a veritable *flood*.

The small countries had been overwhelmed by their sheer number, and in the end, their Saplings were destroyed.

boing!

“Oook!”

A/N: Map update



Chapter 95 THE VOICE

Seize Kingdom, a large country in the western region of the Central Continent, had been within the range of the large-scale summoning magic circle that had called up the Unseelie Lord. It had been attacked by hundreds of thousands of dark pixies. But as befitting the title of being a large country, they had succeeded in raiding the Origin point within their border, defeating the prison escapists and destroying the magitool that served as the Origin. Peace had returned to them for the time being.

The assaults by demihumans and monsters all over the world, as well as the battle between the Unseelie Lord and the Dark Lady Whitehare, had brought down over half of all the human countries. But chained by the pride of being a large country, the citizens of Seize Kingdom had still not yet been evacuated.

Yet they had heard the rumors, all the same, even when no one knew where it had come from.

The people had heard that there were signs the countries with weaker militaries were going to abandon their Saplings in order to avoid being dragged into the war. The people had spoken of their unease, their worries about the status quo to their lords and ladies, yet at the same time, they still prioritized their livelihood above all else. Their dependence on the Saplings were far more powerful than their concern of what was happening on other continents, and they would not let the Saplings go even when ordered by their own ruling nobles.

On top of the castle walls of the capital of Seize Kingdom, the general of the army, the man who had been dealing with the dark pixie stragglers, was taking a cigarette break. Then he took in the sight in front of his eyes and gaped, the tobacco pipe dropping from his mouth.

“...what the fuck is that?”

A green mountain was moving toward the city.

But as it got closer and closer, he realized it was no mountain. It was a massive slime. The people of Seize began to panic.

“A slime?!”

“How can there be one so enormous?!”

“What happened to the towns on its path?! Why hadn’t I heard anything about this?!”

“The outer towns seem to be unharmed...”

“That’s no illusion! It’s actually there! It’s coming!”

“Ready the artillery! NOW!!!”

As the mountainous slime came within several kilometers of the capital, the magic artillery set up on the walls fired.

boing!

“”” ...eh?””””

The enormous creature several hundred meters tall and several kilometers wide *jumped*, passing over the dozens of cannon shots. The ground shuddered as it landed.

Seeing the green mountain begin moving again, the general roused himself from his shock and once more shouted his order.

“...f-fire! FIRE!”

The slime continued its inexorable advance, at times flattening itself, at times twisting and warping to open holes for the projectiles to pass through harmlessly, and at times repeating its jumps.

Regardless, the bombardment continued to hit its target more frequently as the slime got closer and closer to the city. The moment evasion was no longer possible, the colossal slime suddenly split into hundreds of millions of small slimes, flooding toward the city as though a green tsunami.

The humans now realized the enormous slime was simply a congregation of small ones. Perhaps they had stayed separated on their way here, and it had been the reason why the outer towns hadn’t noticed them.

Why had they come here? Why had they merged into this... ‘king slime’?

At any rate, the humans found themselves not quite caring at the moment. They had been worried about the enormous slime, but now that the congregation had split, the barrier would surely repel the small creatures.

But the humans had underestimated the slimes. Once more, they were struck dumb by the impossibility in front of their eyes.

“””...huh?”””

The slime horde simply passed through the barrier as though it wasn't there. They *squelched*, affixing themselves onto the walls and melting through the stone, and they flooded into the city.

A chorus of screams echoed as the soldiers and the townspeople were washed away by the tsunami. One of the soldiers watched a slime jiggling on his palm, and he realized what they were.

“...jelly slimes?”

Jelly slimes were a type of monster. They were calm by nature, and they could eat *anything*, including raw garbage, and so were quite prized by humans. Yet it was also the reason why there had been a period of time when they had been overhunted, and now jelly slimes were considered an almost-extinct species.

Where had they been hiding, and in such number?

Jelly slimes were much too weak to be considered a threat. Their lack of magic power was the reason why the barrier hadn't caught them.

boing!

On top of the clock tower, a jelly slime with a color somewhat darker than its brethren jumped. The horde of slimes that had been indiscriminately cleaning people's houses and laundering clothes of panicking citizens all stopped what they were doing to instead head for the palace.

—over here—

—quickly—

Several hours later, the capital city of Seize Kingdom had had its palace buried in the horde of single-minded slimes, its Sapling destroyed with barely any resistance. The jelly slimes then immediately left with such order as though following a *leader*, and they disappeared without a trace, leaving behind the dumbfounded townspeople without a single hair on their heads harmed, and a *squeaky clean* city without a single speck of dust.

boing!

The large country of Seize had fallen, and it hadn't been the only one to be brought down by such circumstances. The same thing had happened to the small country of Harcing to the north of Seize, only the culprit hadn't been slimes. They weren't even monsters that could be deterred by the barrier.

Harcing had been attacked by dogs, cats, and similar near-magicless creatures, as well as animals resembling pigs and chickens that were being kept as livestock.

And not only that, wild rabbits, boars, monkeys, and many more had also come from their homes in the mountains and forests to join the attack. Aside from being normal animals, they shared no other commonality, though if somebody had looked, perhaps they would have noticed that the creatures were all munching on *something*.

Millions of animals entered the capital city, heading for the governor's castle.

"Stop the damn beasts, now!"

The soldiers were running toward the donkey that was leading the horde, bows and guns in their hands, when they suddenly tripped on flat ground. The flock of animals went past them unimpeded.

One of the soldiers picked up the strange object on the ground where he had lost his footing. He tilted his head in puzzlement.

"...a banana peel?"

—over here, over here—

—no adults over here—

Even as the animals approached the castle, the soldiers still resisted, desperately trying to repel the chickens and wild rabbits. Some of the animals were wounded by spells and weapons, but after they retreated to a certain location and ate *something* to recover, they continued to head for the castle once more.

The townspeople weren't unscathed, of course.

A three-year old girl was wandering, seemingly to have gotten lost in the chaos, when she stumbled and skinned her knee.

As she cried, a monkey passing by gave her what he was holding in his hand.

“Ook.”

“...banana.”

The little girl took the tiny banana from the black-and-white monochrome monkey and ate it. As her scratch healed, her tears instantly stopped to give way to a beaming smile.

“Thank you, mister monkey.”

“Ook.”

The monkey shook his head as though telling her not to mind, and he gallantly leaped on the back of a donkey passing by to ride away. Several hours later, Harcinq's Sapling was liberated.

—hang on—

—just a little bit more—

“— [Gospel] —”

My Gospel and Fiorfata's Curse clashed. The blast covered the palace of the large country Dixhut below and wiped it out of existence.

“...urgh.”

I wanted to say I managed to cancel out its attack, but I'd be lying. It took everything I had to deal with its half-hearted effort, and I still received several thousand in damage.

“...got it!”

Our attacks just now had destroyed the Sapling of Dixhut, and it had been revived somewhere else. As always, the World Tree once more sent me a white magic stone, and not only that, it also sent me some mana to help me recover at the same time.

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Archdemon Lv. 66]

□The demon of Laplace. One who had ascended beyond an Archdemon.

[Magic Points: 213,500/220,000] 30,000 ↑

[Total Combat Power: 235,500/242,000] 33,000 ↑

[Unique Skill: <Causality Alteration> <Dimensional Manipulation> <Consumption> <Materialization>]

[Racial Skill: <Fear> <Mist Form>]

[Simple Identification] [Human Form (Wonderful)] [Subspace Inventory]

[Dark Lady]

—*watch out*—

“!!”

I immediately gathered magic into my hand and parried Fiorfata's magical blast.

That was close... while my body didn't require sleep or rest, I'd still been fighting for several days straight without stopping. I was beginning to slip. Thankfully, as I gained more magic power, things were slowly getting easier and easier.

...and ever since I passed level fifty as an Archdemon, I started to hear a faint *voice*. With every level I gained, the voice got just a little bit clearer.

This wasn't the voice of monsters... whose was it?

But it wasn't the time for me to be distracted by my musings. Around thirty percent of the Saplings still remained. Even if I could free them all, I still didn't know if I could even win. All the same...

"I won't give up!"

—*just a bit more*—

Chapter 96 THE LAST MAGIC STONE

“Old man... how many countries have agreed by now?”

“I would say about half.”

“Damn it, half of them still believe they can win even now...?”

“Most of the small countries have joined in. I believe the large countries with powerful militaries would be more stubborn, however.”

“Well, ours is as well, isn’t it? Anyway, you’re certain the hardliners in the army haven’t found out about this?”

“I... would not say they absolutely haven’t, though I do believe they are currently much too occupied for that.”

“At any rate, we don’t have much time. Continue with the plan.”

“Understood.”

The presence of a person vanished from the hidden room. The man remaining behind leaned deeply back on his chair. He sighed, whispering a name.

“...Shedy.”

I’d entered the Central Continent. I continued on my route to destroy the Saplings starting from the north, all the while dodging Fiorfata’s attacks.

“— —.∴_≠/]] ℒ.∫^αϕ — — ”

Fiorfata’s magic surged, and the night sky fell. The wide-ranging meteor shower tore apart the forests and the geography.

“— [Absolute Nadir] —!”

My mist of extreme cold froze the scattering earth and trees. Then

Fiorfata just swatted it aside.

“Gah!”

Our powers clashed. I crossed my arms to protect myself from the shockwave several kilometers away that was racing toward me.

I took damage, but not as much as before. With Absorption evolving to become Consumption, I could now convert even a portion of the damage into magic power and take it in myself, giving me more power to fight.

The small country Dixseld was virtually empty of people by now, and I freed its Sapling. Then I headed toward my next target, Quinze Kingdom. It was the large country that had been sending its battleships at me multiple times, and perhaps that had been the reason why it no longer had any firepower to resist. The whole capital city of Quinze disintegrated as it got swallowed up in my battle.

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Archdemon Lv. 70]

[Magic Points: 218,000/232,000] 12,000 ↑

[Total Combat Power: 241,200/255,200] 13,200 ↑

And then, in my expanded perception, I felt several flying battleships.

...four of them? Judging from the direction they were coming from, they must belong to Vinguit and Battrol, the two countries that had also attacked me multiple times as Quinze had.

The humans were still thinking they could do something even now, were they...

Iron bolts were fired from the ballistae set up on the ships' decks. They didn't do anything to Fiorfata, of course, but they were also no longer effective against me as I was now.

Fiorfata ignored the battleships to continue attacking me. I did the same, putting the ballistae and magical artillery out of my mind to focus on my dogfight, dodging only Fiorfata's attacks. One of its stray projectiles downed a battleship.

The humans' military was nothing but a hindrance now.

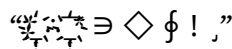
“Leave!!” I shouted at them, pouring magic power into my voice. The remaining battleships abruptly stopped moving.

One of them then charged forward at full speed, as though they'd lost their calm.

I was sure they must have their own reasons to fight, even if they fought only for the sake of the human race and no one else. A ballista bolt grazed me to fly toward Fiorfata, directly hitting its head by sheer coincidence.

Such feeble physical attacks weren't even capable of scratching it, of course, but the fact remained that Fiorfata had been hit by humans. It had been hit by *puny* humans.

Its blank face slowly turned toward the ship.

“”

Hundreds of beams of light gathered together and with a wave of Fiorfata's hand, they tore into Mount Leonard and its summit.

“Oof!”

I barely managed to dodge. The battleships weren't so lucky; they took a direct hit, the lasers slicing all of them into ribbons.

But the lasers hadn't stopped there. Fiorfata swung them horizontally, the beams of light extending far past what I could see to cut into the land thousands of kilometers away, and the Demon Lord continued moving its arm until it began to point south. The lasers touched the barrier of the World Tree that I could faintly see far off in the distance, sparking an enormous explosion upon contact.

My mind blanked out for a moment upon the sight.

“NOOOO!!!”

I tore open a hole in space and teleported to throw a punch into Fiorfata's face. The direct clash between two sources of magic power blew away the dust and clouds for dozens of kilometers.

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Archdemon Lv. 73]

[Magic Points: 233,000/241,000] 9,000 ↑

[Total Combat Power: 257,100/265,100] 9,900 ↑

[Unseelie Lord] [Fiorfata] [Race: Dark Pixie] [Demon Lord]


One of the seven Demon Lords ruling Netherworld. A god of the Netherworld.

[Magic Points: 475,000/600,000]

[Total Combat Power: 545,000/670,000]

We stared at each other with only meters between us. There was a crack, albeit faint, on Fiorfata's face for the first time. It grinned, its mouth opening like a fissure, as though it was delighted of the battle.

But it hadn't been an equal trade. To deal just that little bit of damage to Fiorfata's face, my right arm was crushed in exchange, turning grey as the curse spread through it.

“ !”

Fiorfata kicked. I immediately blocked it with my right arm, sacrificing the cursed limb.

“Aagh!”

It was the first time I got hit by a direct attack from Fiorfata. I was blown away for hundreds of meters, the right side of my body was *mush*, and my magic power went down by several tens of thousands.

I gritted my teeth. The precious balance I'd been trying so hard to preserve was broken by my own hands. I'd lost control of myself when I saw the World Tree being attacked, and before I knew it, I was already charging in.

The World Tree was the *only* thing that must be protected, no matter the cost.

...no, not the only thing. There was another reason for me to protect this world.

—*don't worry*—

—*you are not alone*—

“Huh...?”

The World Tree sent me more magic stones, and it wasn't just one or two. This wasn't the first time it gave me so much.

Had Fiorfata's long-range attack hit a country somewhere?

No... the new Saplings hadn't reported being attacked by anything.

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Archdemon Lv. 81]

[Magic Points: 254,000/281,000] 40,000 ↑

[Total Combat Power: 282,100/309,100] 44,000 ↑

I used my refilled magic to turn mist and back to human, regenerating my right side.

People, *beings* all over the world were fighting for the sake of their home, even if I didn't know who they were. I had help.

“α” ◇ —! ☺ ”

“HAAH!”

Fiorfata closed the distance of several hundreds of meters in a blink of an eye, and I slammed into it in mid-air. While I'd nullified the worst of it, I was still the only one to be blown away.

That attack damaged me, but the magic-covered arm I'd used to block was still intact, and there were no signs of a curse on it.

I could fight... the gap was still there, still large, but it wasn't insurmountable!

“— [Absolute Nadir] —”

“— — ∴ ≠/† ‡ ∝ ♪ — — ”

My blast of cold and Fiorfata's magical blast detonated as they came into contact. The impact ravaged the land for dozens of kilometers.

The World Tree once more sent me white magic stones.

I could see... something. Flashes of images passed through my mind, images of places, locations. Is that... Blobsy?

Panda?

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Archdemon Lv. 83]

[Magic Points: 282,000/287,000] 6,000 ↑

[Total Combat Power: 310,700/315,700] 6,600 ↑

We wailed on each other as we flew in subsonic speed. The shockwaves alone were already enough to shear off the upper half of Mount Leonard.

More white magic stones. Still more unfamiliar scenes flashed through my mind.

This time, it was... the players? Isaac...? Even Weed and Sandra... wait, was this monster Jennifer?

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Archdemon Lv. 88]

[Magic Points: 287,000/302,000] 15,000 ↑

[Total Combat Power: 317,200/332,200] 16,500 ↑

Demihumans, monsters all over the world were fighting to liberate the Saplings. I could see them! There were even countries among the humans who had allowed the demihumans in themselves!

I continued to consume magic power in my fight, and I continued to recover with the magic stones and the mana the World Tree was sending me.

I could still fight!

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Archdemon Lv. 92]

[Magic Points: 296,000/314,000] 12,000 ↑

[Total Combat Power: 327,400/345,400] 13,200 ↑

[Unseelie Lord□Fiorfata] [Race: Dark Pixie] [Demon Lord]

[Magic Points: 452,000/600,000]

[Total Combat Power: 522,000/670,000]

The gap was closing. I could handle close combat now. But as an

Archdemon, I still lacked a *decisive* method to bring down the Demon Lord that was Fiorfata.

In front of me was a large gap that couldn't be measured by magic power alone, the gap of *existence* itself. I knew that. I might not be able to close it even if all the Saplings were liberated.

But I won't give up. I'll fight until the very end!

As the fight carried me toward the center of the continent, a fleet of about ten battleships arriving from the west came into my view... more humans?

This direction was... Touze Empire? Tiz's country...

So he was just another of the same, was he... I pushed my slight disappointment to the side, ignoring the fleet to head for Touze Empire.

The ten ships approached. As I dodged Fiorfata's attacks, I pointed my hand toward the fleet, getting ready to deal with the distraction... when all their engines suddenly stopped working. The ships began to slowly drop out of the sky.

"What happened...?"

I used Dimensional Manipulation to take a look into Touze Empire. In the courtyard of a large palace, I saw Tiz holding something in his hand. It looked like a switch of some sort.

"Tiz... did you do that?"

The next moment, another whole bunch of magic stones were sent into my hand.

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Archdemon Lv. 99]

[Magic Points: 328,000/335,000] 21,000 ↑

[Total Combat Power: 361,500/368,500] 23,100 ↑

The humans... the remaining human countries had all set their Saplings free by their own hands at the same time.

They weren't all rotten... they weren't!

Just one more Sapling! I knew where it was, and it was right in front of me! Inside the palace of Touze Empire — right behind Tiz!

The barrier protecting Touze's palace vanished. The door behind Tiz was open. I saw the final Sapling with my own eyes.

I was so impatient I didn't even use teleportation, instead blasting magic power to propel me forward. Roofs of houses were torn off, and the royal knights protecting the emperor were blown away in my wake. Yet even within the tempest, Tiz was still there, kneeling to keep himself from the wind and taking not a single step back, waiting for me. He pulled out the sword on his hips and threw it above his head.

“Use it, Shedy!”

It was... the magic sword that Tiz held as his greatest treasure, if I remember correctly...

As the naked blade flew toward me, our eyes met for a single moment.

I flew past Tiz, grasping the sword in my hand. I poured magic into it and slashed toward the final Sapling, shearing it into halves.

The Sapling vanished into glittering motes of light, and from within it dropped the final white magic stone. I dove toward it and took it into my hand.

I opened my eyes to a world of white.

The hand that had been holding the final white magic stone, I realized, was now being grasped by a girl I didn't know, both of her hands covering my own.

The glasses-wearing girl seemed to be about ten years old, with a somewhat dark complexion and distinctly Indian features. Standing in the world of white, she smiled, looking truly happy.

—we finally meet. I'm number 99... I've been waiting for you, together with everyone else—

Chapter 97 THE FINAL EVOLUTION

Everywhere I looked, I saw only white, except for the girl holding my hand. She told me she was number 99, and that she had been waiting with “everyone else”.

“Where is this...? And what do you mean, ‘everyone’...”

—we are inside of the World Tree. Open your eyes. Open up your heart... if you're scared, just a little bit is enough...

don't worry. All of us are on your side—

Deep inside me, I knew she was speaking the truth. So she must have known, too, that I still could not trust, still could not let anyone into my heart.

But... even when I knew she was truthful, my door had been shut ever since I was born. I no longer knew how to open it.

—don't worry—

Someone touched my shoulder. I turned around to see that it was a boy who looked about the same as the age of my current appearance. He was looking at me kindly.

Was he... number 01?

And it wasn't just him. An Asian boy about ten years old and a slightly-older black boy were holding my hand in encouragement.

Number 17...? Number 08... ?

Their thoughts poured into me from their magic stones that I'd taken into myself, and my sight *expanded* as the world was painted over.

The ground was thick with green foliage as far as I could see, dotted with beams of dappled sunlight that had found their way through the green canopy covering the whole sky. Above the labyrinthine and enormous branches of the World Tree were many, many children.

They all greeted me with a smile.

The secret alpha testers... the ninety-nine orphans who had died to the corporation's betrayal...

There were kids from ten to fifteen years old, both boys and girls, of all nationalities and races. I only barely managed to recognize where they had been from by looking at the traditional clothing that they wore.

—*thank you*—

—*thank you*—

—*thank you*—

—*number 13... you have saved us*—

—*you have saved*—

—*you have saved our souls*—

The secret alpha testers spoke with gentle voices, full of warmth.

I see... so what I'd done hadn't been for nothing, then. I did it... I actually saved them.

I closed my eyes, immersing myself in the warmth of their gratitude, the warmth of the sunlight.

The sun then darkened for a fraction.

—*sorry*—

—*sorry*—

—*sorry*—

—*we'd let you be in pain alone*—

—*we'd forced our burden on you*—

—*we'd made you bear the resentment, the hatred, all by yourself*—

“That’s not true!”

I was just trying to survive. I’d even told myself it had been for you, when all I was doing was justifying my vengeance.

“I... I don’t deserve your apologies...” I said, biting my lips.

The girl of number ninety-nine gently shook her head.

—we were the same—

—it hurt. It was unbearable. It was terrible—

—we died, bearing dark hatred for the world, cursing it—

As the other children followed up with their own words, the sun once more darkened.

But then... the light slowly returned together with its warmth. The ninety-nine secret alpha testers gathered around me, touching my hands one after another.

—but we were saved—

—you have freed us from our hatred—

—you have taken us away—

—from the darkness—

—so now—

Their voices joined together as one.

—it is our turn to save you—

—take it. Take our final power—

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Archdemon Lv. 100]

□The demon of Laplace. One who had ascended beyond an Archdemon.

[Magic Points: 338,000/338,000] 3,000 ↑

[Total Combat Power: 371,800/371,800] 3,300 ↑

[Unique Skill: <Causality Alteration> <Dimensional Manipulation> <Consumption> <Materialization>]

[Racial Skill: <Fear> <Mist Form>]

[Simple Identification] [Human Form (Wonderful)] [Subspace Inventory]

[Dark Lady]

[Final Evolution Available]

My vision blanked out. Once I could see again, the World Tree and the secret alpha testers were already gone, leaving me once again in a world of white.

It wasn't the blind whiteness as before. Instead, everywhere I looked, I saw geometric shapes and lines with the same basic white tone, as though I was inside the world of cyberspace. So I wasn't inside the World Tree, then. This must be my own personal mindscape.

“...final evolution...”

It was the last bit of power given to me from all the secret alpha testers. This was probably where my final evolution would happen, then, and the reason why it looked like cyberspace was probably because I was an artificial demon, and the evolution process had based itself on that same artificial system.

Evolve.

I focused on my decision. Boxes of text appeared, floating in the air to my left and right.

[Demon Lord]

☐The pinnacle of demons, a ruler of the Netherworld. The diametrical opposition of gods. The granter of the fruit of wisdom to mankind, and

the devourer of their ripened civilization.

[Beast]

☐The pinnacle of demons, one who takes the shape of an animal. Savage and cruel. A predator and a destroyer, eternally seeking conflicts.

[Devil]

☐The pinnacle of demons, the traveler of dimensions. One who gorges on souls of humans, who understands and charms the hearts of humans, who grants otherworldly knowledge on a whim.

These boxes were filled with red text and were on my right. Next were the blue-colored boxes on my left.

[Draconic God]

☐A supreme creature, one who has lived through an eternity to acquire a spiritual body. Possesses great wisdom and force of will, as well as immense power.

[Minor God]

☐An intelligent creature who had reached the threshold of godhood. The protector of life, and the ruler of the cycle of reincarnation. Rarely is there a natural Minor God, as most manifest by stealing power from another god. Called a

[Goddess] when female.

[True God]

☐A Major God born from the minds of intelligent beings. A true god, one created solely for the sake of those who are both their creators and their worshippers. Possesses no physical form. Power drastically fluctuates depending on worshippers.

“Umm...”

On the right side were demons, and the left were... gods? So I could evolve into these?

I was honestly surprised becoming a god was even a choice for me. I guessed I had the secret alpha testers to thank for that.

But could I win against Fiorfata as a god?

Among the choices was a Demon Lord, the same as Fiorfata, and the explanation mentioned being diametrically opposed to gods. If Demon Lords were godkillers, then I didn't think becoming a Minor God would be much of an improvement from what I was already. Draconic Gods had the same problem.

True Gods were born from the thoughts of their worshippers, so I might not be able to keep myself as *me* if I chose that.

If I wanted power to fight Fiorfata, then perhaps I should choose to become the same Demon Lord as it was. Being a Beast or Devil might be good too, though I felt like a Demon Lord was the most balanced in terms of offense and defense.

Artificial or not, I had been evolving as a demon in the first place. I should be able to get used to the new power right away if I continued that line of evolution.

But I'd already made my choice. Not out of these six.

I chose the seventh option hidden among the others.

I had been a human who had no understanding of humans. I had only gained my insight into the hearts of others after discarding my humanity. From my wavering heart came a fragment of itself...

I took it. I grasped the white box of text hiding itself right in front of my eyes.

Then the white space that was my mindscape shattered. A vast world stretched out in front of me as I looked down on Yggdrasia, my new home.

I will protect this world. I will protect it for you.

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Joker]

□ Dea Ex Machina. An artificial goddess born in cyberspace. Possesses the right hand of a Demon to destroy all, and the left hand of a Goddess to save all.

[Magic Points: 500,000/500,000] 162,000 ↑

[Total Combat Power: 550,000/550,000] 178,200 ↑

[Unique Skill: <Causality Alteration> <Dimensional Manipulation> <Consumption> <The Divine Language>]

[Racial Skill: <Fear> <Mist Form>]

[Simple Identification] **[Deity Form (Lovely)]** **[Subspace Inventory]**

[Overlord]

[Goddess from the Machine]

Chapter 98 GODS AND DEMONS

Tiz stood in the castle's courtyard. He whispered, staring at the remains of the destroyed Sapling.

“...Shedy?”

Shedy had used the magic sword to cut down the final Sapling, taking something from within the vanishing light into her hand. Then she disappeared into the cocoon of light.

She wasn't gone. She was there. He could feel the enormous weight of her magic power, the presence of a true Dark Lady, still there.

But she wasn't moving.

She was frozen as though a victim to her own power, as though her snow-white form had meant something far more literal.

As worries gnawed on Tiz's mind, he, together with everyone else still staying behind in Touze Empire, all shivered as they suddenly felt a malevolent presence outside the city.

“...the Unseelie Lord...”

Fiorfata, the Unseelie Lord. A pinnacle of demons, a terrible being worthy of the name Evil God, summoned by mad humans. It wielded enough power to swat down the prided battleships of humans as though they were nothing but flies, and to bring cities and countries to ruin with a flick of its hand.

It was the face of the sins of the human race, the sins of mankind.

The humans had claimed the World Tree, what should have been the very lifeline of the world, as their own; had brought suffering to so many lives; had set the world onto the path of ruination. And now their sins had manifested themselves in the worst way possible, to enact indiscriminate retribution upon the whole world.

Despite how irresponsible it might sound, this was no longer a matter that humans could solve. And even if they had the power to, in all likelihood they would have used it only for themselves.

A pair of fluffy rabbit eyes draped on her lustrous, somewhat-messy locks of hair. When she had looked about fourteen before, now she had grown to fifteen, perhaps sixteen, the childishness fading from her features. The survivors of Touze all released an unwitting sigh as they saw her.

Her scarlet dress, modeled after a bunny girl outfit, had had some changes. Her bunched-up skirt had unraveled to resemble a tailcoat, with the long-extending hem wrapping around her legs. Depending on the angle, it almost looked like a gown.

Powerful magic surged from the white girl — from Shedy, the magic *different* from what she had before. The skies trembled in front of her.

From above, Fiorfata showed a fissure of a smile as it looked upon the birth of a new *God-class*. It pointed toward her and toward the city stretching below it, and it released an enormous magical blast.

Facing the approaching sphere of magic that was dozens of meters across, Shedy silently raised a finger of her left hand toward the sky.

“— *Firebloom*—”

With the power of The Divine Language — the evolution of Materialization — a glove, resembling azure flower petals, appeared to cover her left hand from the wrist.

A pure white mist burst from her left hand. As the mist touched upon the foulness, it transformed into black petals as though absorbing the malevolence and erupted in blazing flames.

The white mist purified, sealing and burning the wickedness. It clashed against Fiorfata’s magic power, and the two opposing forces sputtered and died out.

Space *twisted*, and a vast swath of the sky shuddered. Shedy suddenly flew out from the haze toward Fiorfata from the front, and a kick struck it in the *back*.

Fiorfata instantly reacted to the spatial reversal, blocking Shedy’s kick with its own arm. The two’s magic power clashed in flickering sparks of lightning.

Both were blown away several hundred meters from the impact, but Shedy had rolled with knees hugged to reduce the force. She forced herself to a stop in the air and pointed her right hand toward Fiorfata.

“— *Rimeblossom*—”

Her right hand was covered by a white glove glowing faintly red, and from it came a raging blizzard that shone with a similar shade. All the miasma in its way were transformed into petals of ice, and the storm lunged toward Fiorfata.

“† ∴ * _ * * ‡”

Fiorfata released a sound that sounded half-singing, half-laughing. Its wings flapped at blurring speed, and it released a wide-ranging magical blast to blow away Shedy's *curse*, that which turned everything it touched into icy petals.

Her left hand was the merciful hand of a goddess. From it came a mist to heal all living beings and to turn all evil into flower petals that burned in eternal purgatory, burning until they were no more.

Her right hand was the ruinous hand of a demon. From it came a blizzard to bestow a peaceful death to the sinless and to turn the wicked into flower petals that froze, annihilating them to their very souls.

The left hand of gods, and the right hand of demons.

The flames of mercy that burned all into nothingness, and the blizzard of destruction that brought death equally to all.

The power of gods, and the power of demons.

Gods purified one's sins by granting never-ending suffering, while demons cared nothing for purification, only granting equal destruction to all.

An artificial goddess faced a demon of the Netherworld. The clash of two absolute powers had cleared away the clouds of the whole Central Continent, and once more, they took to the skies of Yggdrasia to

resume their battle.

*

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Joker]

☐Dea Ex Machina. An artificial goddess born in cyberspace. Possesses the right hand of a Demon to destroy all, and the left hand of a Goddess to save all.

[Magic Points: 489,000/500,000]

[Total Combat Power: 539,000/550,000]

[Unique Skill: <Causality Alteration> <Dimensional Manipulation> <Consumption> <The Divine Language>]

[Racial Skill: <Fear> <Mist Form>]

[Simple Identification] [Deity Form (Lovely)] [Subspace Inventory]

[Overlord]

[Goddess from the Machine]

[Unseelie Lord☐Fiorfata] [Race: Dark Pixie] [Demon Lord]

☐One of the seven Demon Lords ruling Netherworld. A god of the Netherworld.

[Magic Points: 445,000/600,000]

[Total Combat Power: 515,000/670,000]

Under the cloudless sky of Yggdrasia, we faced each other with nearly a hundred meters between us.

With my evolution, I finally gained power equivalent to Fiorfata.

...and as traditional whenever this happened, another one of my abilities evolved *weird*...

...so anyway, I got the evolution for my final ability. I'd arrived at the same plane of existence as Fiorfata, and I had gained the power to

defeat it.

But... without Blobsy and Panda, without the dragons' sacrifices, without the many, many monsters and demihumans, and without the help of some humans to grind down Fiorfata's magic power, I couldn't have stood in front of it as I was now.

I had evolved. I was a Joker. I was the final and the greatest trump card.

I was both a deity and a demon, a man-made goddess born from the world of cyberspace.

I was *dea ex machina*.

My new power had been granted to me by the secret alpha testers... no, not just them, but by the whole world of Yggdrasia.

All the same, even if we were now on a level playing field, I still only just evolved. I didn't know how much of my power I could use. Still...

"Fiorfata. Ready yourself."

I wouldn't let it recover any more magic. I would end this, here and now!

Chapter 99 THE FINAL BATTLE

“—Load—”

I activated the four evolved abilities I had — Causality Alteration, Dimensional Manipulation, Consumption, The Divine Language — in parallel, and my magic power surged. Demonic power covered my right hand in a glove of faintly-red flower petals, while divine power covered my left hand in another one of the same, only azure-colored.

“—— ∃ϕ⌘ ∩[∞] ‡ —— ”

In response, Fiorfata released its own outpouring of magic from its whole body. Our powers clashed, sending the earth and the skies of the Central Continent trembling.

“Hah!” I shouted, dashing as I tore through the air, rolling forward during my charge to bring my heel down on Fiorfata. It snapped its long, withered arm like a whip in defense, vibrating its wings just a fraction to repel me with a shockwave.

“**Firebloom!**”

Mist flowed from my left hand. As the white petals touched Fiorfata’s miasma, they blackened and burst into flames.

Yet the blast was still not yet entirely nullified, flinging us away from each other once again. Fiorfata released beams of light from its right arm, and I answered by thrusting out my own.

“**Rimeblossom!**”

The blizzard coming from my right hand clashed against Fiorfata’s lasers.

Its magic power was converted into icy petals as its lasers seared away my magic power. The collision resulted in an explosion that reverberated all across the Central Continent. The shockwave tore trees off the ground, enormous trunks tumbling in the air as though they were nothing more than leaves. Hills were grated away and the land flattened.

We slammed into each other once more, ignoring the damage we had taken. Fiorfata's fist hit my stomach while my kick crashed into its face.

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Joker]

[Magic Points: 453,000/500,000]

[Total Combat Power: 503,000/550,000]

[Unseelie Lord□Fiorfata] [Race: Dark Pixie] [Demon Lord]

[Magic Points: 431,000/600,000]

[Total Combat Power: 501,000/670,000]

Fiorfata had answered my provocation. It hadn't tried to attack anything else to recover its magic, instead agreeing to fight me head-on.

Was it the pride it had as a pinnacle being? Or was the cruelty of demons spurring it on?

As a demon, I'd always thought my aspect was 'ruthlessness', and now, I could feel that I'd gained the aspect of

'rationality' as a goddess.

Our combat power were about the same. Yet I was taking slightly, but distinctly, more damage that Fiorfata was, perhaps due to its superior experience in being a pinnacle of demons.

Which was why I knew that to have a chance of winning, I had to fight with an actual plan. I had to be as ruthless as demons and as rational as machines.

Fiorfata once more split its face apart in a smile. Had it noticed my determination, I wonder?

...fine then, Fiorfata, let's get to it!

“— [Nadir Beyond] —”

I clapped my hands as though praying, teleporting a freezing mass of space to cover Fiorfata whole in an instant, engulfing it in white frost.

“ — — ⊃ ♪♦ — — ”

Fiorfata shook it off with brute magic force and countered with lasers, but I was no longer there. I was already charging forward the moment I made my attack. The multiple beams of light changed their directions to chase me.

I dodged, grazing them, and got into melee range with Fiorfata. I used **[The Divine Language]** to create a five-meter chain of cold iron, throwing one end like a whip to wrap around Fiorfata's left arm.

“Well then, let's see who last longer.”

“♦ lo [⌢]☆ n_xg ◇ ēr'?”

I *pulled* my left arm wrapped with the other end of the chain and slammed my right fist, wreathed in magic, into Fiorfata.

It answered in kind and swung its right arm, which I blocked with my left.

Our attacks blew us away from each other, but the chain held us back.

Fiorfata immediately tried to cut the chain. I ran reinforcing magic power through it and while Fiorfata was distracted, I whipped a kick toward its head with all my strength.

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Joker]

[Magic Points: 442,000/500,000]

[Total Combat Power: 492,000/550,000]

[Unseelie Lord□Fiorfata] [Race: Dark Pixie] [Demon Lord]

[Magic Points: 418,000/600,000]

[Total Combat Power: 488,000/670,000]

As I expected, I had a much better chance when it was a melee fight. If my guess was correct... then Fiorfata was only making do with the experience it had gathered during its long, long life, and that it hadn't had much experience in close combat itself due to being originally a dark pixie.

Cold iron could suppress evil, and could be strengthened due to its

high affinity with magic power. I wasn't good enough with the material to make a weapon, of course, but I could make a *very* tough chain.

“HAAAH!”

I unleashed the whole of my magic to swing the chain and Fiorfata with it, slamming and burying the Demon Lord into the ground. It pulled at the chain to bring me close and released a blast from beneath the earth.

The ground exploded. I was blown into the sky, and the taut chain brought Fiorfata with me.

The next moment, both of us pulled at the chain, flinging us together. Once we were so close our hands could touch, Fiorfata released beams of light at point-blank range.

“Rimeblossom!”

I didn't care about offsetting its attack. The blizzard released from my right hand was purely to whittle Fiorfata down.



Two immense sources of magic power clashed with barely any distance between them. The violent explosion cut into both our magic reserves. For an instant, I took a defensive stance to minimize the damage—

“Wha-?!”

—but Fiorfata took the opportunity to pull at the chain to throw me away, taking me by surprise.

Fiorfata followed, connected by our binding. It snapped its long arm at me like a whip while I was still unbalanced. I strengthened the cold iron chain as much as I could and held it up to block. The impact rang in my ears.

I followed through, wrapping the chain around Fiorfata's neck, pulling its face to meet my knee.

“ ”

The impact *cracked* its head. It tilted its head just a fraction.

Too bad for you, Fiorfata...

“Looks like I’m better at fighting dirty!”

Once more, I jerked the chain back and slammed my elbow into its face, creating another crack. Yet even fractured as it was, its head once more split open in a smile.

It headbutted me in my face.

“Oof!”

I held back my reflex to bring my hand to my nose, instead swiping at Fiorfata with a kick. Both of us crashed into the ocean surface at such speed it felt like solid ground, the water erupting violently. I idly wondered how long ago we’d left land.

We were sinking deeper and deeper. This was bad. Underwater was bad. I couldn’t turn into mist to dodge with water around me.

But just as I struggled to rise from the water, I heard a heavy crash. Something had just chomped at Fiorfata underwater.

“GRAAAAAAGH!!!”

A sea dragon?! There were still monsters trying to help me!

Get away! I shouted, but underwater, all that came out were bubbles. The sea dragon broke the sea surface, dragging the chain — and me with it — out of the water.

Fiorfata struck, and everything above the neck of the sea dragon just vanished. Some of the splattering blood hit me.

I slammed both my hands at Fiorfata in anger, using Rimeblossom and Firebloom at the same time.

Crack! The fractures on its face widened. The cold iron chain was torn apart, the stress finally too much for it, and Fiorfata was flung away.

“... ... ‡♦ § ♦ ∋ √□□ ∫∫ † — — ? ”

We floated above the waters, once more facing each other from a distance. Fiorfata stared at the torn chain in apparent puzzlement. Then it smirked, an enormous amount of magic power suddenly surging from it.

“—— ∫∫ √□ ‡□ — n u i ṡ a n̈ c̈ e——”

Crap!!

Thousands upon thousands of beams of light shot out from Fiorfata's whole body to pierce into the sea dragons that had been lurking beneath the ocean, waiting for their chance.

For the first time, the sounds coming out of Fiorfata weren't the bizarre *noise* it had been releasing, but instead a recognizable word in the common language of Yggdrasia.

We had been completely ignoring our defense in our brawl, and both of our magic reserves had gone down quite a bit. But Fiorfata still chose to remove everything that could disturb us first, so that it could put a decisive end to our battle.

With most of the larger creatures under the sea eliminated, Fiorfata now turned its lasers toward land.

“—[**Nadir Beyond**] —!!”

A glacial cold covered Fiorfata. It didn't take more than a few moments for it to be dispelled, however, and Fiorfata once more cracked open its head in a smile and resumed attacking the continent.

All the dragons that I could see, waiting for their opportunities as the sea dragons had, were being shot down, their wings full of holes. They fell to the ocean.

This was *really* bad. This was exactly what I had been trying to prevent by keeping its focus on me, but Fiorfata finally realized this whole world was against it.

Even if I had arrived at Fiorfata's level, I had only just evolved. I didn't have the experience. I had no way to prevent the Demon Lord's wide-range attacks, nor a method of assault powerful enough to stop it.

I stared at my hands.

The right hand of demons, and the left hand of gods. A while ago, using both of them at the same time had allowed me to deal quite a bit of damage to Fiorfata.

But... should I use it?

It had been more powerful than I expected, that was true. But it had also been more unstable, more than what I thought I could control.

The *demon* inside me was whispering to me, telling me that if I did it right, I had a chance to win. But the *goddess* inside of me disagreed, telling me that in the worst case scenario, I could inflict a serious wound to this world.

But I couldn't do nothing. At this rate, this world would—

—*believe*—

A voice interrupted my thoughts, covering me with its *warmth*. My hesitation and worries melted away.

It wasn't the voice of the secret alpha testers. It was...

“—**Load**—”

Once more, I activated all my abilities and charged up my power.

Yes... I'll believe. I'll believe in this world, and I'll believe in you, its protector.

Through the World Tree, I saw flashes of images from throughout the world. Everyone was looking at the sky, offering their prayers for their home to be saved.

As Fiorfata continued its onslaught, I poured all the magic I could into my hands and charged at the Demon Lord.

A demonic frost erupted from my right hand, and a divine flame burned on my left. They crackled in contact with each other, but I forced them together, weaving them into a single mass. My hands touched as though praying to the sky.

“FIORFATA!!!”

Upon my shout, its beams of light converged upon me.

I charged forward anyway even as the lasers threatened to burn holes through me, slamming the volatile demonic-divine mixture of power into its face, putting all my weight behind the blow.

Both my arms shattered under the overwhelming force.

At the same time, a large crack formed on Fiorfata's head, which then soon expanded to cover its whole body in a spiderweb of fractures. The Demon Lord began to crumble from its extremities.

But it wasn't enough. Fiorfata still lived.

The light of magic shone from its arms. As soon as I saw it, rather than using my divine power or my demonic curses, I was already stretching out my fractured hand into my inventory in a reflexive return to what I was most used to: fighting with weapons.

Space clattered and shivered. I took out a sword and threw it with all my strength, shouting in pure effort.

“HAAAH!!!”

Tiz's enchanted sword struck Fiorfata's magic in a flurry of sparks and shattered into pieces. The magic that the Demon Lord had been charging was scattered, glittering in the air together with the fragments of the blade. I hid behind the dazzling sparkles, squeezing out what strength I had left to draw the black-scabbard sword on my hip.

The blade tore through space, absorbing my now-godly magic power, Fiorfata's own scattered magic, and even the flying fragments of Tiz's magic sword to *evolve*, transforming into a slim longsword of pure white. Its name, the name of the sword that was my kin, rose unbidden in my mind.

Palesnow.

The blade cut into Fiorfata's crack-filled face and became a channel for me to slam my demonic and divine magic power into the Demon Lord.

Fiorfata's head *shattered* as my magic power erupted from all the fractures on its body. As the Demon Lord crumbled, it chuckled,

whispering to me its final words.

“...*W o n̄ d ė r f u̇ l*...”

The Demon Lord’s body collapsed into particles of black light, and they too soon vanished.

Goodbye, Fiorfata... if you hadn’t agreed to face me head-on, I would have lost by now.

I raised my right hand to the sky to absorb all the miasma that Fiorfata had left behind. Then I pointed my left hand toward the ground, sharing power to the lands wounded in our battle.

My mist covered the world. The life-giving mist healed the wounded earth and creatures, and from the scorched dirt, the ninety-nine young seedlings of the World Tree rapidly shot up to maturity to heal the world.

Even a goddess’ power couldn’t revive the dead. But it could allow new, strong life to be born into this world.

And so it was that my battle with Fiorfata came to its end. The world was saved.

I, the girl who was once called a ‘demon child’ that brought misfortune to everyone else, had become a *goddess*, protector of a new world.

Chapter 100 FINAL CHAPTER – THE WISH

A certain nation of Earth had, by sheer happenstance, discovered a new planet. An *extraplanar* one. They had then begun to plan an invasion to this new world for its resources.

Especially for the unknown new form of clean energy called ‘mana’. Seeing the potential military applications, the government, as well as the defense industry, had ‘recruited’ unaware people to gather mana as players in an MMORPG

game, as well as one hundred children as live testers for a military experiment.

All of them were orphans, and all possessed some form of special ability.

Through studying their powers, fields of science and medicine entered an unprecedented golden age. But once the children were no longer useful, the corporation deemed them ‘disposable pawns’, and used them as such in an attempt to develop mana-using weaponry.

However, the plan had been forcefully brought to a stop by a single girl, the final and only survivor of the experiment.

Multiple research centers of the corporation and the accompanying research data had been destroyed. Even the army of the nation that boasted the most powerful military in the world had also suffered heavy losses.

The only facility to have escaped destruction was the game department, which had been left alone as her eyes to monitor the situation of Earth. Otherwise, facilities with either the equipment to connect to the new world or to collect mana, as well as the knowledge about the technology itself, had all been thoroughly wiped out. Now, even if they could revive the plan and keep it hidden, it would still take them at least decades to get back to the stage of practical applications.

Furthermore, those involved in the plan now feared the shadow of The Girl of White. The very *idea* of resuming the plan already terrified them.

Yet there were those who hadn’t known that fear. There were those who were unaware of The Girl of White that had returned to this world.

No matter how much they’d tried to control the information, the more people involved, the more chances it had of leaking.

Secrets had a tendency to *percolate*, like water through stone.

They had been doing their utmost to defend themselves from foreign espionage. Industrial spies and similar infiltrators snooping around had been a constant threat, but the intelligence departments of the corporation and the military had always been prompt in their countermeasures. As such, there had been no major problems.

But the destruction of the chain of command by the girl of white had become a vulnerability to be taken advantage of by the foreign agents.

And today was the day a certain militaristic nation in the Orient began their first connection test to ‘The New World of Yggdrasia’. This achievement had been built from the information they had stolen, as well as the cooperation of the researchers they had bought off.

“Begin operation test.”

This nation sold a *lot* of cheap electronics as one of its main industries, and by hiding tiny organic chips inside their products, they’d learned of the secret of the new world that a certain Occidental country had been hiding.

Year by year, they’d slowly gained more and more of the related information and technology by bribing researchers and high-ranking government workers, and a few months ago, they’d finally succeeded in acquiring a researcher possessing critical knowledge of the technology.

Yet the equipment they’d developed were still several generations behind, as shown by their need of a facility so enormous it took up a whole baseball field. Perhaps the researcher they’d bought off hadn’t been that involved in the *really* important research.

If one of the main researchers of the Western corporation was here to see this facility and the equipment it contained, they would have thought it would be several decades more before the Eastern people could even begin sending avatars to the new world and gather mana.

But the Eastern country’s leader and higher-ups coming to observe the operation test hadn’t known that. They were only imagining the bright future waiting for them ahead with grins on their faces.

“So this will allow us to send more of our citizens...”

They had been making use of their overwhelming population to execute a policy not unlike a human wave attack, sending their people as immigrants to other countries and using them to take control of the country from within. However, these last few decades had seen fewer and fewer countries willing to take immigrants, and their overcrowding population was growing out of their control. They needed to find a new land to be their citizens’ destination.

None of them had been aware that they wouldn't be able to send live people to Yggdrasia, much less that the atmosphere itself wasn't even breathable to Earth humans.

They believed that their problem would be solved as long as they could send their people. They had proceeded with their plan upon that assumption, and finally, they began their operation test to connect to the new land today.

The enormous screen started to show images, albeit still blurry, of a gigantic tree that pierced the sky.

The room was astir with astonished exclamations. "...*the World Tree...*" whispered one of the governmental higher-ups.

All were beaming, certain that this sight would soon belong to them.

But then, the scenery on the other side of the screen was suddenly fogged in white, as though covered by a *mist*.

"...what... is that...?"

And then the screen showed a life-sized silhouette of a girl with drooping long ears that looked like they belonged to a rabbit. A crimson crescent of a smile abruptly appeared where her mouth would be.

A white finger poked out of the screen. Somebody squeaked in fear.

Next came a pair of deadly sharp pin-heels, red as blood. Scarlet eyes, snow-white hair, and long rabbit ears poking out from her locks. The rabbit girl looked about mid-way through her teens, and she wore a crimson dress reminiscent of a tailcoat.

The girl of white gave a faint smirk, her gaze frosty. The researchers and engineers around her were frozen, spellbound expressions etched on their faces, and they crumbled into snowy powder.

Screams rang out the next moment, mixed with shouts of the soldiers.

"FIRE!"

There were enough bullets to pulverize the enormous screen behind

the girl, but she stood unharmed. The girl of white gently spread wide her arms and clasped her hands before her chest as though in prayer.

“—[**Nadir Beyond**]—”

The next instant, all was white ice.

People, machines, grass, even the ground — flesh and iron froze all the same. The largest military compound of the country, together with many, many soldiers and high-ranking officials, were within the freezing sphere of dozens of kilometers in radius. All vanished as dust.

.The moment had been captured in real-time by the *eyes* of multiple military satellites.

But the instant the image of a girl standing in a desolate, white-colored crater appeared on-screen, her head turned to look at the satellites’ cameras. The last thing the satellites saw was her smile as she touched her index finger to her mouth. The very next moment, all the military satellites in orbit ceased operation, terrifying the operators affiliated with the armed forces.

Yggdrasia, the new world. A world held up by the World Tree and ninety-nine Saplings. A world slowly on the path toward ruination due to the human race monopolizing the World Tree’s boons, as well as the nations of Earth seeking to steal the unknown form of energy called ‘mana’.

Yet Yggdrasia’s fated end had been averted upon the appearance of the Girl of White, that small girl who had been called a ‘demon’, who had suffered from the cruelty of others. In time, she had walked through the door of godhood, and it had been by her hands that the Evil God summoned to this world by the sins of mankind was repelled. The path toward apocalypse had been closed shut.

The battle between the goddess and the demon had been truly fierce, and it had left behind a severe wound to the planet.

But the reborn World Tree Saplings had healed the scarred lands, bringing new life to the world once more.

The human race that had monopolized the Saplings, those who had built their prosperity on the suffering of other life, had rapidly declined upon losing their blessing.

They had been dragged into the worldwide conflict, losing their barriers and their protection from monsters, and so it was no surprise that many lives had been lost. And with how dependent they had been on the Saplings' blessings, many more would.

Still, it hadn't been enough to make up for the crimes the human race had committed. Many demihumans and sapient life still bore a grudge against the humans. In a way, the humans' true ordeal was only just beginning.

Nevertheless, their experience of this disaster had taught many among the humans to realize their sins.

These people had then gathered under the leadership of Tischlar, the former emperor of Touze Empire, and the Warrior Hero named Gold. They searched for the path of survival together with, and helped by, the elven and beastman people.

"So this is where you are, sir Tischlar."

"Sir Gold..."

The two men said no more, standing in silence to watch over the town being restored.

Even if the settlement could be repaired, there was no longer any barrier protecting the people from monsters, and neither did they have the magic to power all the magitools of convenience that they once had. People once more survived by burning firewood for warmth and for cooking food.

On the other hand, it was fortunate that they still have a place to return to. Gold's hometown, the desert country, was no longer an environment to live in. The overuse of magic had turned the land into a lifeless desert, and it would be centuries before people could make it their home again.

At the moment, the revived Saplings were beginning to regulate the environment once more, although now they no longer focused their blessings only on their surroundings, instead spreading it to the whole planet.

The people had been lucky to have survived, and many of them knew it.

That was to say, however, that some still didn't.

Humans were weak. It had been the reason why the other races had allowed the humans to leech off the World Tree.

Among those who had gotten used to their former life of abundance, there were surely some who still hadn't learned their lesson, who were thinking of taking the Saplings' magic even now.

And perhaps it would be the demihumans this time, of which some had already turned the tables on the humans and had become oppressors themselves. Perhaps one day, they would be the ones to desire the Saplings. If it happened, it would be a true war between all the races, one that would spell doom for this world.

But Tischlar and Gold knew that such a future would never come.

Their eyes were drawn toward the new temple that had been erected in the reviving town. People were praying, wishing that they would never see war again. They prayed in front of the statue of the Girl of White.

As long as the new Goddess born of this world still existed, they were sure that such a future would never be.

"As long as Shedy's here..."

"Indeed. She would never allow it."

Men would always desire. But the new Goddess of this world would surely not forgive fools.

"Sirs, the conference is soon to commence," said a voice behind them. Tischlar and Gold turned around.

It was the elven princess and her brother, the prince. Near them were

demihumans that seemed to be their bodyguards: Selille, the former leader of the rural resistance, and Isaac, the young man who had introduced himself as her adjutant.

A connection from Yggdrasia to Earth still remained. A small group of players were continuing to log in even now.

The MMORPG game *World of Yggdrasia* had had their ties to the defense industry cut completely, and the scale of the game had been dramatically reduced.

The country never wanted to let go of their access to the new world, of course. Regardless, the development team, which had since gone independent from the corporation, continued to maintain the game. Their expenses were paid with donations from those who knew the truth, and a neutral observing organization to watch for invasion attempts from both sides had been established.

The game was now completely pay-to-play with a service fee, no longer freely opening its doors to anyone as it had before. Nonetheless, the more respectable players such as Sandrea and Weed continued to enter the game, helping to keep the peace for the locals by hunting savage, unintelligent monsters.

As the representative for the players who knew the truth, Isaac had come to this town together with Selille.

On their way to the joint human-demihuman conference, Tischlar spoke.

“Which reminds me, sir Isaac. You have gone to inspect the countryside, if I’m not mistaken. Has peace still not yet return?”

Isaac smiled as he replied.

“There hadn’t been any conflict between demihumans and humans. The region had calmed down, relatively. There’s been rumors of a swordsman going around subjugating dangerous monsters with a *horde* of women behind him... would you happen to know who he is?”

“No?” Tischlar said, tilting his head in puzzlement.

Walking behind him, Gold wryly smiled in remembrance.

Upon defeating Fiorfata, I returned to my home. The World Tree.

“I’m back...”

The World Tree replied with a gentle shake of its vast canopy, welcoming me back.

The World Tree. The one single green giant that held up this whole world. I squinted, looking through the swaying leaves and the rays of dappled sunlight that danced as though a kaleidoscope, and I gently took a seat on the immense root.

I had been an unwanted child.

Born with my albinic looks and the power to bring misfortune to others, I was shunned by my own birth parents, scorned as the “demon child”, and thrown away as they told me they “never wanted me”.

I had wanted to be irreplaceable to someone. I had wanted a place where I belonged, a place just for me.

But nobody looked at me.

I never knew how to communicate with others.

That corporation only ever wanted me for my power. It was why once they finished analyzing it, they could so easily throw me away and into another world as a disposable pawn.

Even when I became a demon, even when I became a Dark Lady, the demihumans only wanted me for the power I could wield.

I knew nothing of people’s feelings.

I had only ever known humans as creatures that did nothing but bring suffering to others. But slowly, as my opportunities to talk with them became more and more frequent, I’d learned that it hadn’t been all that they were.

All the same... the only one who would hold me dear, who would protect me, was *you* alone.

boing.

“Ook.”

“Yes, yes, you too.”

Blobsy and Panda leaped into my chest as soon as they returned. I kissed them, lightly and full of gratitude, and I gently brushed the white sword faintly trembling on my hips.

The only ones I could trust in this world were Blobsy, Panda, Palesnow, the secret alpha testers... and *you*...

“...the World Tree...”

With my kins in my arms, I closed my eyes, surrendering myself to the world.

I'll protect Yggdrasia.

Now that I'd become the goddess of this world, I would protect you, forever.

Embraced by the World Tree, I dreamed.

I saw humans aware of their crimes, sweating as they fixed up the streets with their own hands.

I saw demihumans handing out bread to human refugees, even when their own grudges were still yet to clear.

I saw monsters trying to protect the Saplings, trying to keep history from repeating.

I saw the secret alpha testers smiling as they greeted me in my dream. They took my hand, pulling me into their circle.

—thank you—

—you've worked so hard—

—rest—

—and let's play when you wake up—

—we're here—

—we'll always be here—

—welcome home—

My eyes turned watery.

“...I'm home.”

I had been an unwanted child, a 'demon', and now, with my transformation into a goddess of this new world...

...finally, my wish, the wish I'd had for years, had been granted.

I had a true family. I had a true home.

Author's Note: Apotheosis of a Demon — a Monster Evolution Story ends here. Thank you for following me all this time.

I wrote this in a bit of a hurry, though, so there might be some fixing later on.

This story is about a girl who'd lost everything and her journey to find a true family and a home to return to. I might have gotten distracted a few times, but I think the story pretty much went how I planned it to.

A lot of my stories are comedies, so this one might have been a bit unexpected to some, but a departure could be interesting once in a while, right?

While this is the end of the main story, I'm also thinking a bit about writing an after-story kind of thing.

Well then, let us meet again in the other stories that I am and will be writing, too. And if it's not too much to ask, I hope to see your comments and rating.

Chapter 101 THE WHITE GODDESS

Not many people knew the truth about the world that was now only accessible in the form of an MMORPG, that it truly existed.

Those who did included only the management of the game, certain players, some people within the upper echelons of the government and military... and a few other superpowers who had, by chance, gotten their hands on the information.

Eager to find new lands to bring into their fold and to send their citizens into, one of these superpowers had bought off and gathered up the scientists and engineers formerly involved with the ‘parallel world’ project. But just as they were on the verge of their first successful test, the Girl of White had turned the whole military research base into a desolate wasteland.

Officially, the country announced it to be an “accident”, one that had resulted in the death of “thirty-five unfortunate souls”, when the truth was that tens of thousands of people had disappeared, never to return, while losses were estimated to be in the range of trillions of dollars. It was a national disaster.

The nation trembled in fear of the shadow of the Girl of White, and they washed their hands of all research related to the parallel world.

But the superpower neighboring them didn’t. They knew what had happened, yet they still desired the boons of the new world. They continued their work with the utmost discretion.

This country had vast lands, but not enough people or natural resources. The harsh climate stalled their crops and consequently slowing their population growth, while their lack of resources did no favors to their industries. They were forced to survive as a militaristic country.

They desired the resources of the new world. At the same time, they also knew to be far more circumspect than their defeated neighbor *and* the superpower that had first discovered the parallel world.

They knew that the first country had failed in an endeavor to gain infinite energy.

They knew that their neighbor had failed a connection test that had been meant as the first step in a plan to send citizens over.

The superpower surmised that, due to a reason still yet unknown as there had been barely any survivors from the previous incidents, the act to connect to the other world itself would invite some form of grievous devastation. So the country did not plan on making any kind of contact; they would only investigate the things that had arrived here from the other side, and they would see if they can gain anything from them.

One day, in a military research compound of the country, a certain *something* arrived after being sent through multiple other countries.

The container doors opened. Under the researchers' instructions, the soldiers carefully carried the item outside. It was a hibernation capsule used for VR, one that was made by a certain country. The glass was fogged, hiding the contents, but there was a name on the capsule. A name in Latin letters.

It read "BRIAN".

Yggdrasia, a different world. A world held up by the World Tree and ninety-nine Saplings. A world protected by an artificial Goddess.

Once, this world had been under the rule of the human race, thieves who had monopolized the World Tree's blessings for themselves. Its mana was being consumed without end, and the world was heading toward a slow destruction. And once Earth began their silent invasion to gather mana, it only hastened the process.

But the apocalypse was then stopped by one person, one single girl who had been called the Dark Lady. By her exaltation into a Goddess, she had protected the world.

The ascendant reign of humans was cut short when the world was ravaged by what would later be called 'The Dark Lady's Great War'. Now, humans were allowed to continue living far away from the World Tree's blessings, under the supervision of those who had once suffered under their hands, who had once been their slaves: the

Demihuman Union.

Peace had come to the world. Yet after the Great War, three years were enough for the greedy and the corrupt to begin forgetting the painful lesson they'd been taught.

Deep within a forest, the ruins of a simple settlement stood. Its former inhabitants had lived in nomadic tents, and so there hadn't been any sign of a standing house. All that remained in the grass were traces of a makeshift log table and a butcher's workplace.

Next to them was a small tent, so new as to be out-of-place. Its size suggested that it wasn't meant to be a permanent dwelling, but for traveling purposes instead.

Morning came. A young boy appeared from inside the tent. He walked to the nearby stream to get water.

He looked about ten years of age. His lithe physique and pointed, long ears hinted to his elven ancestry, a demihuman race. While elves were famously long-lived, elven children still grow as fast as humans, so the boy was truly as old as his appearance suggested.

The boy's name was Yol. When the world was still the dominion of humans, he had lived here with several other families, hiding away from the humans' eyes.

At the time, aside from the babies, Yol was the only child in the village. He hadn't been old enough to help out much, so he spent his time just picking firewood and fruits by himself.

Then one day, what looked to be a child appeared in front of him.

Their face and body was hidden under a cloak. He didn't really know for sure if they really were a child — he only knew they were small. They didn't talk, didn't make a sound, didn't let him get close. The gestures they made in response to his words were the only way Yol knew they understood him.

The strange child-like form only ever appeared in the forest whenever Yol was alone.

Then one day, he heard from the adults that some human slavers had been about to attack them, and that they had been defeated by a

‘white mist monster’. Yol immediately thought that child was the Forest’s Spirit, and as a sign of their friendship, he had gifted them a Name. He promised them they would meet again.

After the human threat had passed, Yol was now free to travel the world.

All the same, monsters still continued to be a danger, and there were also some humans who had chafed under the rule of demihumans and had escaped into the forest to live as bandits.

Yol wanted to visit the forest where he once lived in. At first the adults hadn’t allowed him, citing his youth, but once he turned ten and learned magic, he finally gained permission, if only for just several days to visit the forest. But after arriving and staying for a few days, the friend who he had thought to be living in the forest still hadn’t shown up.

On the final day, there was an unexpected encounter.

snap

Hearing the sound of cracking branches, Yol looked up. It wasn’t the friend that he had been waiting for, but several demihumans.

“Heey, little guy. You’re an elf, aren’t you. Why are you here alone?”

“...who are you, misters?”

They were feline beastmen clad in what looked like the attire of hunters. Yet he thought it strange that hunters would go so deep into the forest, and not only that, he also noticed a large-set man to the back of the group, his face hidden under a hood that glimmered as though made of wet leather. The man sent shivers down Yol’s back.

“Oh don’t worry, kid, we’re just coming to visit the elves who used to live in this forest. We heard that they moved to this area. Where’s your family now?”

“...we used to live here until three years ago. Nobody’s here now.”

The man who’d talked to Yol slightly narrowed his eyes. A moment later, the feline beastmen behind him began to quarrel.

“Fucking hell, who the fuck said there were elves here?! Fucking waste of time!”

“It ain’t my fault! There’s no way to know how up-to-date information about elves outside of towns is!”

“Shut up, you two, the kid’s gonna figure it out. I *just* got him calm.”

“M-mister?”

The kindly-sounding man’s gaze was now ice-cold. Yol flinched backward a step. An arrow flew from the direction of the men to stab into the ground next to his feet.

“Now now, stay right there.” The bow-wielding feline beastman then turned around and bowed to the hooded man behind him. “Sorry boss, no elf girl here. Just a kid.”

“It’s fine, shit happens. Kids sell for a decent price too anyway. Life’s been comfortable enough these days for the perverts to start showing up, so there’s good demand now.”

The hooded man pulled off his hood, revealing grey skin covered in scales.

He was a fishman. A race that shared the sea with the merfolk.

In contrast to the merfolk whose bottom halves were that of a fish, the race of fishpeople had legs, allowing them to walk on land. They still could not go too far from the water, however, and longer journeys would require them to wear a specially-treated coat.

So why had the man gone to all this trouble, leaving his home so far behind?

He was a slaver.

The merfolk were, as a rule, all beautiful, and so they were frequently hunted to be pet-slaves for humans. On the other hand, the most the fishpeople were useful for was simply labor, and only near the water, at that. It was why that had avoided the same fate. And as they had not joined in the Great War, they had survived with their wealth and power undiminished.

The War had drastically reduced the population of humans and demihumans, but not the fishpeople. After joining the Demihuman Union, their influence ballooned by virtue of being the only race with their population and wealth intact.

They used their money to buy up magitools that had been left behind by the formerly dominant human race, and they began to approach the prosperity that humans had once possessed. And like humans, they then thought about making slaves out of other races.

Peace had come to the world. Even beastmen, those who should have understood the painful lesson better than anyone else, now began to lose themselves to their desires. They were about to repeat history once more.

“W-Why are you doing this?! The world is protected by the Goddess —”

Finding his courage, Yol began to shout, but the first man silenced him with a slap.

“Shut the hell up. *She* was one of those who had broken the world in the first place, and *now* you tell me to worship her?

You think I’m an idiot?”

“B-but...” Yol whimpered.

“Hey now, don’t damage the goods.”

The fishman spoke, having come near Yol. He pinched the boy’s cheeks and turned his tear-stricken face upward.

“Regrettably, us fishmen never met that White Goddess or whatever her name is. Can’t believe in a god you’ve never seen, you see? And besides, we haven’t heard a thing about her in all these three years. You sure she didn’t die together with that Evil God she fought?”

Yol bit his lips in frustration. The human Hero named Gold was someone Yol truly looked up to, and he had been proud of the fact that he had once fought together with the Dark-Lady-turned-Goddess. Gold told him that she had forgiven all the evils that humans had wrought, that she was a true Goddess who had saved this world from its fated ruin.

Then why were these demihumans doing this? Why were they repeating the same foolishness of the human race that they had once hated? Why were they making a mockery of all the Goddess had done?

Yol whispered. He reverently asked for forgiveness from the Goddess, and he said his apologies to the friend that he still hadn't met.

Forgive us, Goddess, we have been ungrateful to our savior... and I'm sorry, my friend. I don't think I can keep that promise now...

“— Don't worry. I hear you. — ”

“...eh?”

Yol jerked his face up. The female voice seemed to have come from everywhere and nowhere at all, yet everyone else didn't seem to have heard it. The first beastman grasped Yol's arm and growled.

“Stand up. I'm sure you know where the other elven villages are... wait, what?”

Feeling a sudden chill, the men looked up, eyes darting around. A white mist began to envelop the area.

“What's happening? Why is there mist?”

“H-Hey! I can't move!”

Everyone turned toward the panicked shout. A feline beastman off to the side was rapidly being covered by white frost.

His legs were frozen mid-step.

“S-Somebody, help—”

The ice rushed across his whole body, freezing him still as his hand stretched out in a desperate plea for help, and the ice statue fell forward. It shattered into white dust.

“W-what...”

“What is that?!”

The men looked on in stupefaction. Appearing from within the mist was a girl clad in a scarlet dress with crimson eyes and snow-white hair, her steps unhurried.

The girls looked to be about fifteen, maybe sixteen. Adorning her graceful features was a pair of long, floppy ears, like those of a rabbit's.

There were no rabbit beastman in this world, with one single exception: the girl who had opposed mankind, who had been the bogeywoman of two different worlds. Formerly called the Dark Lady Whitehare, everyone now knew her under a different name.

“T-The White Goddess?”

“— **[Firebloom]** —”

Flame burst out from the divine left hand of the Goddess, turning a feline beastman into burning petals in a blink of an eye. The first beastman stretched out his hands toward her as though begging for forgiveness, and the burning petals began to spread from his fingers, purifying his evil soul. Flames of mercy burned until he was no more.

“N-no, no no no, I didn't do anything wrong, it's them, it's them!”

The final remaining fishman trembled in terror, rambling and making half-formed excuses. He tried to run away. The Goddess pointed her right fingers at his back.

“— **[Rimeblossom]** —”

“It's not my fault—”

The fishman was interrupted by the raging blizzard coming from the Goddess' demonic right hand that swallowed him whole. All of him, even his soul, broke apart into petals of ice and dissipated. Not a speck of himself remained.

“G...Goddess?”

Yol could only mutter in astonishment as the White Goddess eliminated the demihuman slavers in a blink of an eye. She patted his blushing cheeks and smiled.

“It’s nice to see you again.”

She whispered, and the White Goddess disappeared in white mist.

Yol stood still, watching her departure as his cheeks still burned. Her words triggered something in his mind.

“...Shedy?” he mumbled.

Chapter 102 PORTENTS OF NIGHTMARE

“Commence the unsealing of subject ‘BRIAN’. All staff, be on high alert.”

In the quarantine laboratory of a research center, a certain superpower was attempting to unseal a hibernation capsule that they had acquired in utmost secrecy from a country to the west.

The capsule had been excavated from the ruins of a military compound in the western country. There were suspicions that the compound had been the location for an experiment to connect to another world, and for testing the new weaponry system that made use of the unknown form of energy gathered from said world.

Yet the weapon testing had ended in the complete destruction of the military compound.

Just what had happened?

Details were unclear even now, but the current theory was that it was an accident, one that had happened when the weapon platform nicknamed ‘The Girl of White’, or ‘Whitehare’, had ran out of control. The vast area that the compound used to occupy was now an icy wasteland, the horrifically low temperature having destroyed everything inside it.

Afterward, the country’s army began to examine the area through long-range reconnaissance. They discovered the underground section of the base several months later, from which they excavated several objects of interest.

The building had collapsed. A part of the surface structure had fallen into the space that served as the foundation.

Seemingly due to the ‘accident’, everything excavated were frozen, and they continued to be so even after they’d been sent to various laboratories for further examination.

Among the excavated objects, the capsule was the most intact. It was sent to a lab with a researcher that had been bought off by the

superpower. The researcher then defected to the superpower country, bringing along the capsule.

The capsule was transported to a research center used for space development that was situated in the outskirts of a city.

With the use of robotic arms and avatars, the unsealing of the capsule commenced in the quarantine lab.

When it was first found, all the machinery connected to the capsule had been pulverized. It was a miracle that the capsule itself still remained, even if half-crushed. The name plate was barely legible on the surface full of scratches and cracks, and the letters spelled out 'BRIAN'.

"...surface temperature... minus 136.6 degrees Celsius. Scans show a very faint organic signature inside."

"Human?"

"It doesn't match anything on Earth, if the results are to be believed."

"So extraterrestrial, then... or could it be *extradimensional*?"

"Even assuming that this is actually life, it's not carbon-based like us... this is life as we've never seen before."

"Amazing..."

High officers of the government and the space agency were watching from behind thick glass. The robotic arm carefully pried open the warped door of the capsule. With a pair of forceps, a remote-controlled avatar scraped off the strange frozen mold-like substance inside.

"Avatar Control Division, reporting in. The low temperature is causing a delay in the response time of the avatar, as well as some other minor glitches. The operator has requested a raise in room temperature."

"Is it going to be a problem?"

"We are unsure. The quarantine lab used to report normal ambient temperature, but now the object has lowered it to minus 62.7 degrees

Celsius. It should still be well within operating temperature of the avatar, however...”

While humans still hadn't abandoned their dream of one day reaching the stars, the development of avatars meant that most space programs now used them for dangerous work outside of spaceships.

Was it truly just the temperature that had caused glitches in these space-rated avatars?

“No point in having the work be delayed, I supposed. I give permission to raise ambient temperature.”

With the permission of the president of the space agency and the high government official, the quarantine lab began to warm up. The remote-controlled avatars resumed their work.

They didn't know that this cold was a *curse* by the Girl of White.

The heater was running, yet the immediate area around the object continued to retain its low temperature. One of the avatar operators turned impatient. As soon as permission was granted, they raised the temperature of the forceps themselves and made contact with the substance.

It was the beginning of disaster.

“Active life signs confirmed in the substance!”

“Following procedure, immediately force-disconnecting all avatars!”

“Avatar 03 isn't responding to force disconnection!”

As the other avatars vanished, having been disconnected, only the avatar making contact with the substance still remained.

Some grey-colored substance clung to their fingertips.

“W-What the hell's this?! It's moving! IT'S MOVING!”

“Calm down, 03. Damage to your avatar won't hurt your real body!”

“I’m going to break your connection terminal! Brace for impact!”

*“Hurry! It’s getting on my arm! My arm’s going grey... aaaaAAAAHH
SAVE ME! OH GOD, SAVE ME!”*

The grey consumed all of Avatar 03, and it disappeared. A moment later, so too did the strange substance vanish like dust.

Shocked silence descended on all those witnessed the scene. It was then broken with a scream from the Avatar Control room.

From the calming spiritual world of the World Tree where my family was, I returned. My two kins lying on my chest woke up as well. I gave them a pat with my finger.

“Good morning, Blobsy, Panda.”

boing

“Ook.”

They snuggled into my chest again. With the two in my arms, I stood from the World Tree’s roots, poking Palesnow in my subspace storage with a finger, and I looked up at the green canopy that covered the sky.

“Hey, World Tree. I’m going out for a bit.”

The World Tree’s branches shook, turning the sunlight that slipped between the leaves into a kaleidoscope.

I heard someone calling for me.

It was the voice of the elven boy that had given me my name.

We’d made a promise to meet again once, long ago. Unfortunately, I wasn’t a spirit of the land as he believed me to be, and I looked different now, too. There hadn’t been a chance for us to meet.

That aside... I’ve only just gone to sleep for a few years. Apparently that was enough for the idiots to start forgetting the *pain*.

I placed Blobsy and Panda back into my subspace inventory. After so long, I once again walked as a Goddess of this world.

[Shedy] [Race: Bunny Girl] [Joker]

☐Dea Ex Machina. An artificial goddess born in cyberspace. Possesses the right hand of a Demon to destroy all, and the left hand of a Goddess to save all.

[Magic Points: 550,000/550,000] 50,000 ↑

[Total Combat Power: 605,000/605,000] 55,000 ↑

[Unique Skill: <Causality Alteration> <Dimensional Manipulation> <Consumption> <The Divine Language>]

[Racial Skill: <Fear> <Mist Form>]

[Superb Identification] [Deity Form (

))] [Subspace Inventory]

[Overlord] [Goddess of Yggdrasia]

...I'm just imagining the changes. Yeah. Must be my imagination.

So anyway, since I was an artificial goddess, I wasn't actually bound by the Naming, but that still didn't change the fact that he'd done it. I probably had a link to him in some form.

It was why I knew where he was. I could see what was happening near him too.

Don't worry... I hear you. I hear your voice.

“[Dimensional Manipulation] ”

Upon my activation of the skill to cross through space, the world itself, as though to celebrate my descent, dramatized my arrival with mist.

Really, the World Tree was so sweet on me.

Right, so... beastmen and... a fishman, I see. It wasn't that the will of

just humans alone were weak. It was *all* humanoids.

The beastmen had regretted their past. They'd fought for the sake of the world.

So I gave them *mercy*.

The mist that grew from my divine left hand burned all the beastmen, incinerating them until their souls were purified, which were then returned to the World Tree through the Sapling. One day, they would be reborn in this world.

"N-no, no no no, I didn't do anything wrong, it's them, it's them!"

The final remaining fishman tripped over himself to run away, all the while passing the blame over to the beastmen.

I hadn't seen any fishpeople in the fight before. They had ran away from both the humans and the war, it seemed. I didn't blame them for it... but that didn't mean they would be forgiven for inflicting the *pain* that the beastmen had once suffered.

I didn't suffer fools lightly.

The blizzard from my demonic right hand froze the fishman whole while he was trying to run away, freezing him down to his soul. All of his existence disintegrated as specks of ice.

"Goddess...?"

I heard the whisper of the elven boy. He was staring at me with his face bright-red, for some reason. I saw myself and my own faint smile reflected in his eyes. I'd changed so, so much from being the white cloud that he had once seen me as.

"It's nice to see you again."

I said my goodbye and gave him a pat on his cheeks, and I left.

I thought I heard him call my name then.

I flew far up into the clear blue sky. Beautiful nature, healed from its wounds, spread across my eyes.

But... I felt uneasy. I didn't know why.

Maybe I should take a look at the mortal world, I thought. I headed for a human town.

Chapter 103 THE NIGHTMARE BEGINS

Coming out of my three-year hibernation, I decided to go check out a human town.

There were a few human villages nested deep inside forests the way demihuman settlements used to be, but there was only one single ‘country’, or at least something close to being a country, that had a lot of humans congregating, where interaction with demihumans was actively being maintained.

The human race once numbered in the hundreds of millions. The virtually-suicidal decisions that they’d made time after time during my fight with the Unseelie Lord and their loss of the World Tree’s blessings meant that the human race, complacent in their luxury and safety as they had been, was now barely a shadow of themselves.

Quite a few of them had still been alive when I finished reviving all the World Tree Saplings, in fact. However, their population took a further dive as many humans found they now had to contend with the threat of monsters, a threat they’d forgotten how to deal with since generations ago, as well as the vengeance coming from a small group of vindictive demihumans.

But all was not lost for the human race. With the help of demihumans and some of their own people who had taken up arms to be Adventurers once again, the dangerous but less intelligent monsters began to be culled. Slowly but surely, a new country was established, and the human race began its journey of recovery...

...according to what the Saplings told me, anyway. The consciousness of the new Saplings had come from my fellow orphans and secret alpha testers, and they could be quite... playful, from time to time. Sometimes they also told me about stuff I honestly couldn’t care less about, like “The neighbor just had a litter of kittens!”

So I had no idea how much of what they told me were accurate.

I took out a pure-white hooded coat from my subspace inventory and put it on. I landed in the only human country in this world.

While the humans had their own leader in the form of a representative

instead of a king, formally, this was actually a

‘multi-racial nation’ run by a council whose members included demihumans.

Over half of the country’s population were humans. Yet watching the faces of the humans walking around town, I saw less excitement for their civilization’s revival and more a kind of *unease*.

Well, I suppose I could understand why. It was exactly because humans were weak that the other races had allowed them to parasite on the World Tree in the first place. Now that they no longer had access to their incredibly convenient magitools, I expected they would feel conscious of their physical disadvantages compared to demihumans.

I understood, but I wasn’t going to do anything about it. I mean, I *was* a Goddess of this world now. I wasn’t going to start favoring one single race over another.

One of the former orphans who was knowledgeable in Oriental culture told me that I was similar to a sort of *koujin*, a wrathful god of purifying flames. By nature, I was very much not any kind of merciful Buddha.

“We humans had once sinned—”

From far away, I heard a faint voice that sounded like it had been amplified by a magitool.

“Hmm?”

On a whim, my feet carried me closer. A single human man and several demihumans were standing on a stage and making a speech in a plaza.

“...Tiz?”

He was that one ex-emperor of some fallen country or another. Haughty, but quite an interesting character. By the end, as a leader of humans, he’d realized his sins and helped me with the destruction of the Saplings. Next to him was... the girl of the pair of elven twins, if I remember correctly.

So to summarize Tiz’s speech, he was basically reminding the humans

not to be idiots again now that three years had passed since they'd started rebuilding. In the same breath, he was also warning the radical faction of the demihumans to stay quiet since the humans were being honest workers now.

...I sympathized with him a bit, to be honest. He was doing this for the good of everyone, but he was probably also making enemies all over the place.

It was now the part when Tiz was shaking hands with the elven girl. I sighed. Paying no mind to the people around me, I teleported to the roof of a building some distance away. I appeared behind a man aiming a *black, cylindrical weapon* at the plaza.

"So what are you doing?"

He jolted and whipped around, almost tumbling.

"W-Wha-who are you?!"

"I won't ask again, fishman. *What* were you about to do with that?"

His hood dropped, revealing wetly glistening scales.

... *them* again? Just what's going on with the fishpeople?

But more importantly, while the weapon he held looked rather beaten up, I still recognized it as a *magic gun* made with Earth technologies.

Despite his initial surprise and vigilance, the man began to smirk once he saw me. Apparently a young girl didn't warrant his caution.

"...ain't it obvious? Humans working with elves mean our profits go down... that's all!"

The fishman suddenly aimed the magic gun at me.

Not a bad response for someone being on the receiving side of an ambush, I'd say. Let slip a bit of tasty intel to distract your opponent, then attack mid-sentence.

Unfortunately for him, he'd made three mistakes.

One, that he was possessing a magic weapon made with Earth technologies. I didn't know where he got it, but it was *not* the kind of

thing that should ever be allowed to remain on this world.

Two, that he was about to repeat history when this world was just beginning to know peace.

And three... that he pointed it at *me*.

In the few tenths of a second that it took for him to pull the trigger, I leisurely watched his finger move in slow-motion as I pointed my hand at him and squeezed.

As a young man, he once got his legs almost bitten off by a shark. Now they were torn to shreds.

As a boy, he once got bitten by a venomous snake. Now his flesh festered as the poison coursed through his whole body.

As a child, he was once trapped in a muddy stream and nearly drowned. Now he suffocated, coughing and wheezing as a vast amount of seawater poured out of his mouth, and he slumped to the ground.

I took the magic gun from the fishman's corpse and crushed it into a chunk of metal with my hands, then threw it into a dimensional gap.

...huh, I wondered if it would later cross spacetime to become an out-of-place artifact in some other world...

Not like it had anything to do with me if it did, though. I gave Tiz a quick glance, the man still too busy making his speech to the people to notice me, and I muttered under my breath.

"Good luck with your work, Tiz."

Then I teleported to the top of Mount Leonard, the highest point in the Central Continent. The vast world of Yggdrasia stretched out before my view.

...somehow, I felt like something was about to go wrong.

It wasn't about the fishpeople who were getting up to no good these days, or at least, it wasn't just them. My unease was coming from the instincts I had as a *Dea Ex Machina*.

“[Dimensional Manipulation]”

I closed my eyes, opening my arms wide, and I connected to the worldwide Sapling network. I began to pick up information from *everywhere*.

I'd become the Goddess of this world. That said, I still wasn't experienced enough to be able to *see* the whole world without lifting a finger.

I scanned through the flood of information, ignoring the 'recommended cat videos' that my Sapling friends were sending me, and I noticed something happening in a village of wolf beastmen in the northern hemisphere. They were being attacked.

Wait, weren't those...

“...dark pixies?”

When the Unseelie Lord Fiorfata manifested, it had also summoned these low demons as its kins and soldiers. Individual dark pixies weren't much of a threat, possessing only the equivalent combat power of a simple footsoldier, but they had been summoned in *hordes*. For less well-defended towns and villages, complete annihilation had been a real possibility.

I had defeated Fiorfata. It wasn't exactly possible to truly *kill* a demon of such power, but its revival should take thousands of years, at least.

Then why were the dark pixies here? How had the Unseelie Lord's kins return to this world? Dark pixies themselves normally resided in the Netherworld, and while they could naturally manifested in the material world, it only happened very rarely.

Then was there some *idiot* calling dark pixies here again...?

At any rate, I needed to eliminate the dark pixies first.

I closed my eyes and stretched out my hand to the scene I held in my mind. But before I could activate my power, a group suddenly jumped in and started massacring the demons.

...who?

The group was full of armed women. There were so many of them I didn't even bother counting. They moved and acted like a single organism, and the dark pixies dropped like flies.

A single man jumped out from within the women. One of his hands held aloft a magic sword, while the other dramatically flicked his blond-colored front bangs. He grinned a blindingly-white grin.

“Have no fear, my venerable madams, lovely ladies and adorable cheries! I, Calimero, is here, and I shall not allow a single—”

I instantly cut the connection out of sheer reflex. I blinked.

So he was alive.

...well, whatever. That meant I could leave the place to him while I go look for the cause of this mess.

Chapter 104 TOWARD EARTH

“World Tree!”

I called for the heart of the world, asking Saplings all over the world to inform me of anything useful... and useful *only*.

The World Tree managed the software side of the world while I dealt with the hardware. I was loathe to interrupt its work, but if dark pixies were returning, then there were more important things to prioritize.

The moment I called, the World Tree sent me multiple carefully curated leads. It sure worked fast... actually, was it just me or did the World Tree sound *happy* when it responded to my request?

According to what it showed me, dark pixies were appearing in several locations around the world and attacking both people and animals. Looking at the places, I realized they were all on the path that I had once taken when playing tag with Fiorfata back then.

Were the dark pixies being spawned from the magic, or maybe the miasma that still remained from my fight with the Unseelie Lord?

...no, I didn't think so. It was true that quite a lot of the dark pixies were at locations where our fight had been the fiercest, but in that case, the Central Continent should have been the worst victim of the current dark pixies assault by dint of being the location of my final confrontation with Fiorfata. It wasn't.

The worst affected was instead the southern hemisphere. To be precise, it was the region to the south of where Quarancingq, the city where Fiorfata had manifested, used to be. I knew Fiorfata had done a number on the place, so it wasn't surprising that dark pixies were now being attracted there... but I still felt like I was missing something.

“...let's just do what I can first.”

Most other locations had monsters, demihumans... and *that* Hero to deal with the dark pixies, so I could leave them alone.

Instead, I headed for the locations that had been hit the hardest first.

“First off, the sea.”

My teleportation was still limited at the moment. If my destination wasn't connected to the Sapling network, or if it wasn't in my field of view, then I couldn't be accurate. I focused my mind on where I wanted to go and a phantom appeared in front of me, taking the shape of the member of my family that had been reborn as the Sapling closest to my destination.

I took their outstretched hand, and the scenery in front of my eyes shifted.

—*good luck*—

“Thanks.”

I departed from the easternmost edge of the Central Continent, crossing the ocean at several times the speed of sound. My flight sent me toward a group of sea dragons fighting a massive horde of dark pixies that had spawned right in the middle of the ocean.

“Get out of the way if you don't want to die!” I shouted.

The sea dragons hurriedly dove toward the ocean floor. A white ball of pure magic formed between my hands, and I fired it at the mass of tens of thousands of dark pixies.

“— [Nadir] —”

In an instant, all the ocean that I could see *snapped* into ice. The horde of dark pixies all froze and crumbled into diamond dust.

“This is...”

Now that I was here, I finally understood. There *were* mana and miasma here, but more importantly, I also discovered that space here was *warped*.

Had the dark pixies come from this spatial distortion? But if so, then where *from*?

“World Tree! Tell me of all the spatial distortions on this planet!”

The reply I got was a list of locations. Where was this? The ocean? This was... an archipelago without a Sapling?

Nowhere else was space as distorted as in that whole region. The area was far away from the Sapling network, and there were a lot of dark pixies.

I couldn't teleport directly there. There wasn't any Sapling nearby, and if the spatial warp was truly the cause of the dark pixies, then it wouldn't be the best idea to expose the Sapling network to tampering by using it.

“[Dimensional Manipulation] !”

After I fixed up the space here with my ability, I departed, flying by my own power to the archipelago. Not very far away, luckily. Only about a fourth of the way across the planet.

I flew straight east, switching between flying and short-range teleportation to reach a continent. I aimed my left hand at the dark pixies that were fighting with the monsters there.

“—[Firebloom] —”

The merciful mist descended to heal the monsters, while at the same time turning the dark pixies and the miasma into purifying petals of flame.

I repaired space with Dimensional Manipulation and headed further west. Just about when I exited the continent and re-entered the sea, I caught sight of the archipelago I was looking for.

I found myself frowning right after.

“Fishpeople...”

I understood now.

While the World Tree's blessing reached even the ocean floor, the Tree and the Saplings themselves were on land. These fishpeople had never

directly experienced the World Tree's blessing, and so they thought it insignificant. They wanted more. They wanted to gain another *blessing* even from outside this world.

Their money-making through the slave trade, their attempt to prevent the other races from working together, it was all because they wanted *this* to succeed.

In front of me was a settlement of fishpeople large enough to have housed several tens of thousands. Now, all of it was swallowed by a muddy grey mass.

Some of the inhabitants were still alive. Most of them, however, had already had the grey infesting them throughout their whole bodies. One after another, their strength failed them and they sank into the mud, turning into nurseries to give birth to more dark pixies.

These fishpeople had used the money they'd gained to buy up everything that the Earth people had left behind. They had torn open space and time in order to summon the Blessed Corpus of the Unseelie Lord, Fiorfata.

...save me...

...I can't...

...it hurts...

...God, save me!

Voices of agony, voices of *things* about to cross the threshold of life and unlife, prayed to God for salvation.

I understood their desperation. However...

“Don't pray to God only when it suits you.”

The air trembled as I Spoke words laden with divine authority. The wailing stopped as though frightened, and the ever-spawning swarm of dark pixies crumbled into dust and disintegrated.

No good and kind god is here on this world, not anymore. This is the only

kind of mercy I can grant you. The only kind I know.

“—[Rimeblossom] —”

The Demon’s Oblivion. The blizzard from my right hand shot forward to lay waste to the malevolent energy and souls, transforming them into fluttering petals of ice. The grey-colored Blessed Corpus disintegrated, taking the whole settlement of fishpeople with it.

The threat was gone. I just needed to fix up the spatial topography here, and things should come to a close by themselves.

...the Earth-made equipment had been destroyed, yet the dimensional distortion here still remained. Where had the Blessed Corpus that had passed through that distortion come from?

“...Earth, is it.”

There were greedy people making another mistake again, it seemed...

I sighed in resignation. I raised my hand toward the dimensional distortion that still connected the two worlds, but just before I could embark on another dimensional crossing, my hand was knocked away with a sparking jolt.

“...World Tree?”

It felt like... the World Tree stopping me from going to Earth?

I would ask why... but I already knew. The World Tree was kind. I had suffered during my time on Earth, and so it was worrying for me, fearing I would once again be hurt if I went there again.

“...it’s fine. I got a lot stronger now. I had nothing but bad memories of Earth, but it’s still one of my homes. Please, World Tree... let me protect my two homes.”

I implored. Then, I felt my restraints melt away.

“Thank you... I promise I’ll be back. You’re here, after all. You and everyone.”

I activated Dimensional Manipulation on the distortion, and I made the transition toward Earth.

This was the first time I came to Earth by myself without using the MMO game's equipment. I didn't know where on Earth I would arrive at. I only knew it would be where the cause of all this lay.

I appeared in the sky. The chilly wind of a snow storm blasted at me.

“...what... is that?”

I saw a vast forest coated in white snow. It was half-submerged in squirming, writhing Blessed Corpus, the grey mud stretching out as far as I could see.

"T ve be e n w ^{''}ā ^{''}ī ^{''}n g f o r y o u : . . l i t t l e b u n n y : . . "

Chapter 105 BRIAN THE DEMON

"T ve be e n w ~~ā ē ī ñ ē~~ f o r y o u : . . l i t t l e b u n n y : . . "

From the mass of grey mud corrupting the vast, snow-drowned forest came a *thought*. A voice that rang directly in my mind.

I knew that tone. That madness.

"...so it's you, Brian..."

Brian had been one of the people in charge of the parallel world department. He had toyed with the lives of a hundred orphans, including me, and after my counterattack wounded his body and mind, he began to be obsessed with me. In the end, he even summoned the Unseelie Lord Fiorfata. Just as he was receiving its 'blessing' and was about to turn into a demon, I killed him.

So how did he survive? I thought I'd erased every last bit of him. Did he have a *core* remaining somewhere else after his demonic transformation...?

[Brian] [Race: Dark Pixie (Seedbed)] [Demon]

□ A soul of utmost profanity. Blessed by a high-rank demon, it has since transformed into a demon itself.

[Magic Points: * * ~~⚡~~ * * ~~⚡~~ * *]

[Total Combat Power: * * ~~⚡~~ * * * *]

He had fallen. He was utterly, irrevocably a demon now. And while I expected him to be nothing more than a low-rank demon, the... colony? The colony that was his body was much too big for my Identification to work properly.

"L i t t l e b u n n y y y y ! ! !"

With Brian's screaming thought, the sea of grey mud that stretched as far as I could see — the demon's Blessed Corpus

“[Firebloom], [Rimeblossom] !”

With the mist from my left hand and the blizzard from my right blasting forward, I spun in place, freezing and incinerating all the dark pixies. Afterward, I shot upward into the sky at supersonic speed to look for information.

I climbed, higher and higher. One thousand became two thousand and five hundred, then four thousand. When the azure color of the sky began to give way to blue-tinted blackness, I looked downward, and I saw that below me was the Eurasia continent.

While there were a lot of radio waves bouncing around in the stratosphere, it was still difficult to directly extract information from them even with my ability. Instead, I tracked the signals to a military satellite nearby and teleported to it.

At this height, the stratosphere held barely any air. My crimson claws sank into the satellite. With Dimensional Manipulation, I accessed Earth's cyberspace.

“...unbelievable.”

In countries with developed networks and centered on the Eurasia continent, the grey mud, the seedbed of dark pixies, was *everywhere*. At the moment, the worst of the damage was still contained in the middle of Eurasia. The spawning dark pixies were still manageable with the local military presence.

But it was only a matter of time before the defense break.

Demons needed mana to maintain their manifestation. The dark pixies were only sustaining themselves by absorbing the life-force of this world, so mundane weapons were still having an effect. But while it was enough to repel the demons, it wouldn't be able to *exterminate* them.

I needed to act quickly, otherwise Earth would destroy itself in the chaos even before the demons devour them all.

At that moment, through the military satellites' surveillance network and my own senses, I saw something. Something flying very, very fast.

...a missile!

Considering the trajectory, it was probably fired by the military of the country I'd arrived in. Nearly a hundred of the missiles climbed into the stratosphere, drawing an arc as they moved toward the forest undulating with grey mud. They slammed into their target and covered the area with a carpet of flame.

I'd heard that a large amount of fire could have a degree of purifying effect. Would fire from a missile work, too?

Immediately afterward, a chorus of screaming minds rushed past me. I couldn't help but hold my head with my hand.

In the end, the fire worked. Sort of. Brian had manifested himself here by using matter from this world, so it wasn't surprising that the mundane fire had had some effect, but not as much as appearance would suggest. It only *looked* damaging because the fire was burning the forest that was serving as food for the mud.

The barrage of screams I heard just now was the death throes of creatures that had been living in the forest. The negative emotions that came from them only created more miasma to excite the demons.

Burned and losing its source of food, the grey mud looked as though it had stalled. Then it absorbed the miasma and began moving again, and this time, with no food source to slow it down, it surged outward to look for more *offerings*.

I knew it, I had to find and destroy the core. But where was it? How would I find it?

“[Dimensional Manipulation]”

I cranked my ability to the maximum and searched for any notable magical signal nearby, but found nothing. Yet I could only continue searching. I had no other choice.

Then I noticed another flying object.

More missiles? Strange, though... they'd fired nearly a hundred, but now there was only one.

I looked at its temperature... hold on...

“...a nuclear warhead?”

Even nuclear weapons would only have the same result. If Brian's core wasn't directly attacked, no amount of heat could do anything more than temporarily stalling the mud. If anything, it would only damage the environment.

I couldn't allow that. What I wanted to protect wasn't the people on this planet. I wanted to protect *Earth itself*.

I released my hold on the satellite and chased after the warhead, expelling my internal magic to accelerate even more.

The ballistic missile had gone beyond the stratosphere and was beginning to drop, its speed reaching several kilometers per second. The projectile was glowing red-hot from the air friction. I caught up to it and with all my strength, I released an upward kick at the missile's belly. My claws slammed into the warhead.

“**[Consumption] !!**”

It exploded. Space began to *burn* by the white light, but all of the heat and light were soon devoured by my ability.

Nothing remained that would indicate there had been a nuclear explosion.

I sighed, winding down from my effort.

I was a Goddess now. I wasn't harmed by the radiation or heat, but my mind was still tired. I supposed it had been because I had eaten the *malice* of humans, that which had expressed itself as a man-made weapon.

Yet I couldn't rest, not yet. My cold mist should be able to keep the mud's spread in check while searching for Brian, and without damaging the planet.

I began moving, but this time, I noticed several objects approaching me.

“...fighter aircrafts?”

There were dozens of them. I could feel them making some sort of

communications with each other after they saw me, and they then began to attack me.

This country had decided I was an enemy, I see...

I could understand why. From their point of view, I was probably just another demon rampaging through their country.

I wouldn't try to convince their leaders. Discussions with politicians would just turn into them trying to find ways for their side to benefit anyway, and I didn't plan on wasting hours for that.

So I'd just say one thing.

"...sorry."

I threw a random weapon I had in my subspace inventory and downed one of the fighters. With the Divine Language, I broadcasted my *will*.

"Get out of my way if you don't want to die!"

Chapter 106 THE RABBIT GODDESS DESCENDS

Dozens of fighter aircrafts flew toward me. This country's military, I supposed.

I sent them a warning-slash-threat in the Divine Language, but it did nothing more than send them into a few seconds of inactivity before their assault resumed.

I flew, breaking the sound barrier and with a wave of my hand, freezing and bringing down the rain of missiles. My palm faced toward the fighters.

I'd given my warning. I wasn't very excited to kill them when they hadn't attacked me out of hatred, but neither did I have the time to shoot them down gently enough to let them escape with their lives. Earth wasn't Yggdrasia. There was no World Tree here to save their souls. I closed my eyes for a second to pray for them, and I slowly clenched my hand.

“—[Causality Alteration]—”

The fighters' cockpits were instantly painted red from the inside. The majority of the aircrafts continued streaking past me, their speed unchanged, and they plowed into the distant ground.

They were all soldiers. Over the past ten-odd years, they'd had many, many wounds from training and combat, and I expected some of them had even died instantly when I activated my ability. How ironic... the more they'd hurt and killed for their country, the higher their likelihood of death.

“...still.”

While I might pray for their passing, that didn't mean I'd start feeling merciful now, of all times.

I was the Goddess of Yggdrasia, not Earth. I would save this planet, the planet where I was born, but I had no plans to save the people on it. I was a *koujin*, after all.

“Stop throwing yourselves at me!”

Despite their losses, there were still fighters several kilometers away who were willing to continue attacking me. I threw daggers from my inventory to take them down.

One of them, the squadron leader from the looks of it, was still unwilling to retreat even when they were the last fighter left. I cut off the aircraft's wings, prompting the two pilots inside to escape, and I tore apart the parachute of the more strong-willed of the two of them, catching him in mid-air. He was slick with cold sweat as the man felt my strength with his own skin, but he still glared at me with all his bravado.

"Damned demon!"

"All of this was caused by the ignorance of your own leaders. I had nothing to do with it."

His language wasn't one I spoke, but the Divine Language would let me communicate with nearly all sentient creatures.

He understood me, I was sure of it. The man in his forties who looked to be a commanding officer grimaced as my voice sounded directly in his mind, and he howled in outrage.

"Spare me the lies, White Demon! I know you! You are the demon that had attacked the country to the west and murdered tens of thousands! The higher-ups told me it was *you* that was the cause of this disaster, and even our neighboring country and the nation to the west told us you were to blame for their losses! No matter how much of a monster you might be, you won't be able to stand against the whole world—"

"...right, I got it."

I see, further questioning would be useless. I released my hold, and the man's screams faded off as he fell faster and faster. My cold gaze stayed on him as I let slip a whisper.

"...so this country had decided to blame me for everyone they'd done, then."

I had thought it wouldn't be very productive to try and convince them, but only now did I truly understand how futile communication would be. This country had bought off technicians and researchers from the West and had touched upon the 'parallel world' despite their insufficient understanding, and their unanticipated failure had triggered a global existential threat. They must have thought that if

what had happened were to be brought to light, the nation would lose much of its credibility.

From a certain point of view, I could understand their thought process, but it was much too foolish. They thought the few percentage of the world that they saw was everything. Even when the world they lived in was in danger, they still prioritized their nation's reputation.

I didn't want to believe that all humans were so idiotic. Yet there was far too much of a possibility that the neighboring country, those who had committed the same mistake, would try to keep this fiction alive as well, thinking that their own reputation will be at stake if the truth about what this country had done was to be revealed.

As the situation devolved, sooner or later, the middle-eastern countries and the United Nations would get involved. The people would then try to find an outlet for their dissatisfaction and fear, and they might just turn their eyes toward *me* — a well-defined enemy, and an easy target to push all their responsibilities on.

Should I demolish this whole region before it came to pass, then? But how much time would it take to comb through it all? Furthermore, how much of the local nature, flora and fauna would be destroyed? Not to mention that I didn't even know if Brian's core was here...

If *humans* were truly such a foolish species...

"...then maybe I should exterminate them to protect this world."

It was then that I noticed something approaching me. It was still far away — several hundreds... no, several thousands kilometers away. And they were coming from more than one direction.

"— **[Dimensional Manipulation]** —"

I re-accessed the military satellite that I was still keeping a connection to. New info appeared in my mind.

...the neighboring country's mobilizing its army? There are fleets of warships crossing the Pacific?

How? That's too fast. It had only been a few hours since I came back to Earth. Even if they'd immediately set off then, there was no way they could have gotten so close.

"Then... had they been *expecting* this?"

It didn't look like their preparations had been for *my* arrival, exactly. My guess was that the other countries had realized that this country was the cause of the disaster. They saw the chaos as an opportunity to further their own interests and bring in their own armies, using the disaster as a pretext. Their troops had been denied entrance by this country and had been waiting outside the border, but my appearance had given them the 'reasonable cause' to interfere.

There was a possibility they weren't here to fight me, but the grey mud instead. I doubted it. They didn't come loaded with incendiary weapons; they were equipped with what was obviously meant for human-against-human combat.

Was every country the same? Were they all people more concerned with robbing from others rather than dealing with a global threat, than the safety of their own lands?

Either way, I would still be their first target to attack, being the most *obvious* enemy to them. The military satellite told me their fighters had already taken off from their fleets to head straight for me. Meanwhile, this country's air force also once again resumed their attack.

I let loose a bit of a sigh, a holdover from when I used to be human, and prepared myself to obliterate them. But just as I focused magic into my arms and got ready for interception, one of the fighters heading my way was suddenly shot through its wings. It fell.

"...what?"

Several flying objects showed themselves from behind the fighters and gave chase. They were far smaller than the aircrafts, yet overwhelmingly faster and more mobile. Impotent before their assault despite outnumbering them several times, the fighters began dropping like flies.

I knew this feeling...

"...mana?"

From these flying objects, I felt *mana* when it should have long since disappeared from this world. In that case, were what they were using to shoot down the fighters *offensive spells*?

They were about five meters in length. Their pitch-black armor brought to mind the image of an insect's carapace that had been

streamlined for flight. One of them changed form into what looked like a griffon and spoke directly into my mind with a telepathic spell.

“Sorry I’m lateeeee, miss Dark Bunny Ladyyyyy!”

“...what.”

...was that voice Jennifer?! The former researcher of the 12th research center, the gaming addict that had declared herself a worshipper of the Dark Lady, *that* Jennifer? I thought she was currently working in the management team for the VRMMORPG *World of Yggdrasia* after it had gotten downsized? Why was she here?

“Lady Shedyyyyyy!!!”

The griffon flew at me like an excited dog bringing a frisbee back to its owner, all the while talking in Jennifer’s voice. I dashed forward and gripped her neck.

“Jennifer... is this one of those mana-using avatars? Is your country *still* doing that? Had they not listened to a single thing I said?”

I put more strength into the hand holding the griffon’s neck, cold mist emanating from me as I fixed my frosty glare at her. Jennifer frantically shook her head.

“N-n-n-no, ma’am!! I mean, this is the final MO-21 model of the mana-using militarized avatar series, but I haven’t betrayed you! And it’s not like I can anyway when you’ve made that Contract with our President!”

“Then talk. What’s going on?”

“Y-yes!”

By her words, the mana-using avatar that she was using had been designed as the final model. All the research about magical weapons had been destroyed by my hands along with the research centers, but only the data about this MO-21

model was intact, having been programmed into the game as the final form of the playable monster avatars.

Jennifer and her co-workers had only discovered it about a year ago. As evolving into it required an absurd amount of magic point — four thousand — the management team had deemed the evolution impossible to acquire or even control with the current setup that they

had. Removing it from the game would require a complete overhaul of the current monster avatar system, and so they'd decided to leave it alone until a solution could be found.

But once dark pixies began to appear on Yggdrasia and Earth, the management team started to consider what the players should do. It was during their talks with the leaders of Yggdrasia that 'messengers' of the World Tree appeared.

"...from the World Tree?"

"It's true! The messengers looked like ghostly children. They said if the players were willing to cooperate, then they would allow us to use our monster avatars on Earth, and the avatars would be infused with enough mana to operate. They also said they wanted us to help miss Shedy."

"..."

The Saplings... my friends, my family. They were doing this for me?

"Those messengers was amazing! They'd already understood how the avatars worked, and they helped us to evolve all our monster avatars into the MO-21 model! They're so much smarter than me!"

"..."

My brows slightly furrowed. I think I had an idea of what happened. To have done this sort of nerdy stuff in secret, it could only have been No. 01.

I attempted to extract information from Jennifer's Model MO-21. What I got were reports of players fighting dark pixies with their MO-21s all around the world, as well as bringing down the fighters deployed to attack me with contemptuous ease.

And *that* was happening when the players weren't even trained soldiers. If the magical weapon project had been allowed to be completed, that country might have ruled the world by now.

So if the players had that many monster avatars... wait a minute...

"Jennifer, were all the MO-21s being controlled by a central system?"

"Of course! Some of our employees and a few players are military hobbyists, and they said we have to have a central control system if we're going to be piloting these things. They even stayed up nights after—"

“Got it. Tell all the avatars to stop harassing the human armies and head for where dark pixies are appearing instead. I’ll be giving direct orders through the central control system.”

I removed my hand from Jennifer. She twirled her MO-21 in the air and gave a salute with the griffon’s front leg.

Surprisingly dexterous.

“Understood! We are the Dark Army, the Bunny Lady’s Royal Guards! All ten thousand of us are now under your command, miss Shedy!”

*

The aerodynamic Model MO-21s danced in the skies.

People of the modern age were used to the sight of avatars being used in dangerous workplaces. However, in situations where rapid responsiveness and snap decisions were required, such as piloting a military aircraft, the human controller still needed to be present on the scene in order to maximize performance.

Yet having a human on board also meant having a *human* weakness.

On the other hand, the mana-using avatars had been attuning themselves with mana through actual combat in another world (albeit presented as a game), and their nervous systems had been strengthened as a result. Their performance far surpassed any and all modern weaponry.

The players hadn’t fought any other humans aside from the soldiers they encountered on their way to their destination.

Even during those encounters, they hadn’t killed anyone, being nothing more than civilians themselves.

But that was fine. There was no need for their consciences to be burdened with death. I was the Dark Lady, the Goddess, and the weight was my responsibility to bear.

The MO-21s scattered throughout the world at speeds approaching that of an intercontinental ballistic missile. Their destinations were wherever there was the grey mud, the breeding ground for dark pixies. As soon as they arrived, I gave them the order through the central system that I’d linked to.

“Begin the assault. Your targets are the dark pixies.”

The MO-21s began their extermination. As I expected, it didn’t take long for them to eradicate the dark pixies while still keeping collateral damage low. These avatars possessed more magic points than greater demons after all, while their targets were nothing more than low demons.

“Thanks, everyone. It’s *my* job from here.”

My gratitude was answered with a multitude of voices from the players.

I began attuning all ten-thousand of the MO-21s to *me* until they were completely suffused in my power, and through them, I activated my ability. In the air, the pitch-black insectile MO-21s all turned white, while those that had transformed into griffons grew rabbit ears from their heads.

“Fear not, humans. Fear only feeds the demons. Rest assured, for I am here. Your planet will be saved.”

As I Spoke, particles of light scattered from the MO-21s. All humans and creatures of Earth turned their gazes to the rain of light.

“[Causality Alteration] [Dimensional Manipulation] ”

The luminous particles began to scour through the past and future of all electronic devices throughout the world. From them, I saw everything about how the grey mud had appeared, how it was spreading, and how it would expand.

“...found it!”

I immediately cut my connection to the central control system and teleported to a mountain range to the east of Eurasia.

My vision flickered, and I appeared in the middle of an enormous blizzard. As though in response to my magic power, the mountains instantly *erupted* with grey mud.

“L I T T L E B U N N Y Y E X Y T I !”

“Brian...!!”

The tsunami of grey surged toward me. I focused all the magic I could muster into my arms, and I brought my Divine and Demonic powers

together with a clasp of my hands.

“— [Chaos Fulmination] —”

With me as the center, a sphere of annihilation expanded outward for dozens of kilometers, erasing and ravaging the grey tsunami. The mountains were stripped bare of layers of earth and rocks, revealing an unassuming research center hidden within.

“Palesnow!”

I called for my kin. The sentient sword appeared in my hands with a flash of its snow-white blade and a sudden emanation of coldness.

I brought it down. My blade sundered the research center several kilometers away in two and proceeded to slice apart a broken VR capsule, as well as Brian’s *skull* inside it.

“A A[~]A_a a^ΔA[~]A^Δā^Δ A^ΔA^Δ R R R G^ΔG^ΔH^Δ H ! _^Δ_T?”

With his demonic core now in pieces, Brian screamed his death throes. No demons could continue to resurrect once their core was destroyed.

But I wasn’t done yet. I swung Palesnow together with an activation of Causality Alteration, and the sundered research center then began to melt into nothingness, bringing Brian with it.

He was gone. The demon named Brian, the man named Brian, *had never been born*.

With his disappearance, the grey mud all around the world began to vanish.

The particles of light I had spread throughout Earth slowly whirled into the air. People everywhere looked up into the sky, enchanted by the sight as though children seeing snow for the first time.

boing-oing!

“Ook!”

As soon as I returned from Earth to the roots of the World Tree, Blobsy and Panda immediately leaped at me.

“I’m back.”

I was finally *home* again. A sense of relief washed over me, and I found myself with a hint of a smile. I held my two kins in my chest. The World Tree greeted me with the rustling of its leaves and the dancing rays of dappled sunlight.

I dragged my weary body toward a length of root and sat down. With Blobsy and Panda in my arms, I let myself be taken by the gentle embrace of sleep.

There were so many things we’d talked about.

There were so many things I wanted to say.

The world in front of my eyes slowly changed. Sitting on the World Tree’s branches were ninety-nine of my friends and family, and they welcomed me back with cheerful smiles. I beamed in gratitude for their help and spread wide my arms.

“Love you, everyone.”

A/N: In stores now: ⅓ figurine of the Bunny, Goddess ver., for placing in shrines. 1000 dollars, tax included.

I think it’ll sell pretty well.

This is the end of the afterstories. Sorry for my infrequent uploads. I’ll be fixing them up bit by bit later.

Now that this chapter’s up, I’m setting Apotheosis as ‘Completed’ again. Thank you for reading.

I might update again if I have a new idea.